'A fabulous collection of traditional lore, activity suggestions, recipes, rituals, deities and prayers to help us connect to and draw wisdom from the seasons. An invaluable resource.'

Philip Carr-Gomm, *Author and Chief Druid of OBOD*

THE MAGICAL YEAR

SEASONAL CELEBRATIONS TO HONOUR NATURE'S EVER-TURNING WHEEL

DANU FOREST

Danu Forest has practised Celtic witchcraft, Druidry and Celtic shamanism for more than 25 years, and is a respected wisewoman and spiritual teacher. Born with the second sight, she is an experienced seer, or Awenydd, and has helped others to 'walk the green road', developing and healing their relationship with the spirits of nature and their ancestors for many years. She is a Druid-grade member of OBOD (the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids) and an Ard banDrui (Arch Druidess) of the Druid clan of Dana. She leads a Druid grove in Glastonbury in the UK, and has held public seasonal celebrations for over a decade. Danu is the author of several books on Celtic spirituality. For more information on her work and courses, visit www.danuforest.co.uk.

THE MAGICAL YEAR

SEASONAL CELEBRATIONS TO HONOUR NATURE'S EVER-TURNING WHEEL

Danu Forest

WATKINS
Sharing Wisdom Since 1893

For my family, and for that most mysterious woman, the ever-radiant, ever-changing Mother Nature, into whose arms we must always surrender.

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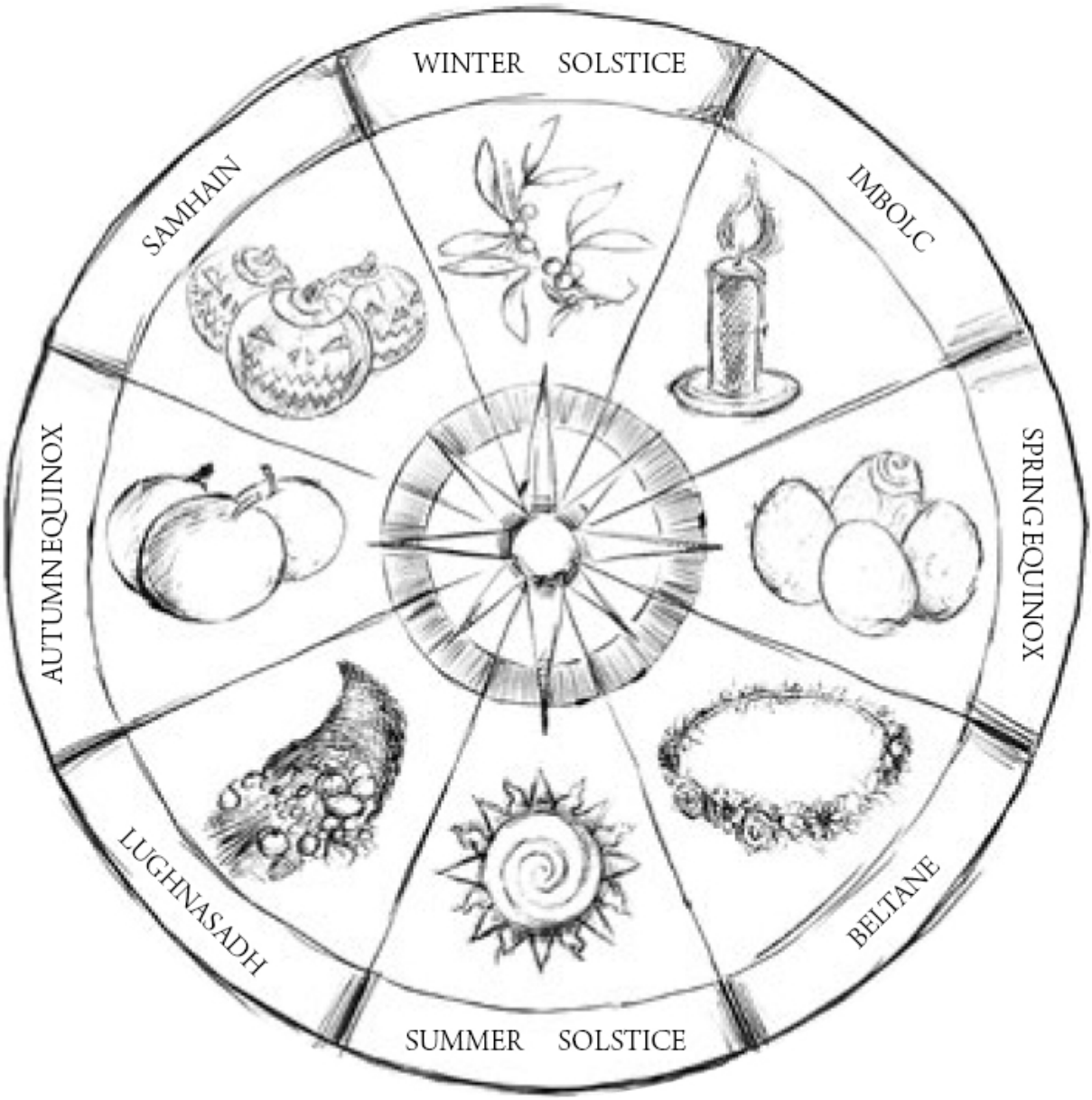
INTRODUCTION

The ever-changing tapestry of nature in all its sublime beauty is something that stirs us all. Since the first ceremonies to honour the hunt, we have marked nature's turning wheel with magic and ritual in our spiritual as well as our physical lives, drawing wisdom and power from the patterns of the seasons. In the Celtic lands of Britain and Ireland festivals have for millennia marked the migration of animals, the growth and decay of wild foods and crops, as well as the movements of the sun and moon. From the Neolithic era the solar cycles of the Summer and Winter Solstices and the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes were honoured as agricultural and spiritual markers, and evidence suggests they also celebrated the cross-quarter days positioned in between these solar events. To the later Celts,

these cross-quarter fire festivals – Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain – were of greater importance, and were often celebrated in conjunction with the new or full moon and great public bonfires. As well as reminders to reap and sow, these were times of spirit migrations, when the veils shifted between the worlds of life and death, between the mortal realm and that of the spirits, faeries and gods. To our ancestors, the divine was manifest in nature and all the earth was sacred, something many of us now seek to remember and draw upon once again for spiritual nourishment and support.

The Wheel of the Year

The turning of nature through the deep rest and renewal of winter, the bursting forth of green shoots in spring, the fiery exuberance of summer and the wholesome harvest of autumn (fall) is an endless cycle of growth and completion that can be mirrored in our own lives – spiritually, psychologically and practically. Every one of the eight special seasonal festivals (see right and pages 4–5) has a history of observance going back to the very earliest times, marked by solar alignments in Neolithic burial mounds and stone circles throughout the British Isles, invoked in myths and folklore and recorded in histories and the ancient Celtic calendar, and these traditions have survived until the modern era in various forms across the 'Celtic fringe'. In the last few decades these ancient celebrations have seen a passionate revival, as many people feel the call to relate spiritually to their environment once again and seek to rediscover their heritage. Woven together in the modern era, these festivals make a consistent whole: the Wheel of the Year. This cycle of conscious celebration helps us, year on year, to align with nature’s rhythms with feelings of wonder and insight, walking in the footsteps of our ancestors as well as creating new ways to mark the seasons for generations to come.



Celtic spirituality

Iron Age Celtic culture spanned much of northern Europe and the Atlantic coast, and was highly sophisticated for its time. Long-distance trade routes facilitated the exchange of ideas, helped by a common language and shared values and spiritual outlook. The Celts' relationship with nature and their environment was all encompassing; they understood that their very lives were dependent upon nature, its seasons and its patterns. The heavens above, their agricultural life below, and the wilderness that surrounded them

were all infused with spiritual significance. In the Celtic worldview, the gods were immanent in nature; they were present in tree and rock, wind and rain, river and soil, sun and moon, together with a whole host of spirits and the ever-guiding ancestors.
Celtic culture waned in the centuries following the expansion of the Roman Empire, but lingered on in what is commonly called the ‘Celtic fringe’ – notably Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ireland. When Christianity came, many Celtic gods were forgotten or turned into saints or faery figures remembered only in folklore, yet traditions that celebrated the turn of the seasons with ceremony and magic have spanned the millennia.

Festivals of the Magical Year

Eight seasonal festivals honour and celebrate nature's yearly cycle:

Imbolc

1–2 February (northern hemisphere)
1–2 August (southern hemisphere)
A time of birthing, of the year’s first green shoots, of the lambs in the pasture and of our own hopes and plans.

Spring Equinox

20–23 March (northern hemisphere)
20–23 September (southern hemisphere)
A time when life springs forth with the turn of the season, bringing joy and exuberance with the blossoms on the bough.

Beltane

1 May (northern hemisphere)
31 October (southern hemisphere)
A time of lovers, the fertile season, when Jack-in-the-green meets his mate, and all life is seeded through the marriage of opposites and their magical embrace.

Summer Solstice

20–23 June (northern hemisphere)
20–23 December (southern hemisphere)
A time of power when the sun is at its height and all life swells as plans come to fruition.

Lughnasadh

1 August (northern hemisphere)
1–2 February (southern hemisphere)
A time to feel pride in our accomplishments and abundance as life's harvest comes into fullness.

Autumn Equinox

20–23 September (northern hemisphere)
20–23 March (southern hemisphere)
The harvest is gathered in, and it is time to prepare for the darkness ahead and find gratitude in our hearts.

Samhain

31 October (northern hemisphere)
1 May (southern hemisphere)
The spirit night is a time to face death and the darkness within, as the wheel turns to winter and the ancestors and the spirits are abroad.

Winter Solstice

20–23 December (northern hemisphere)
20–23 June (southern hemisphere)
A time of deep rest and renewal, while nature dreams within the womb of the earth and the sun is reborn, giving us more hours of light each day.

The Coligny calendar

The Druids, the Celt's religious caste, were fabled for their extensive knowledge of nature, philosophy and the sciences, which included detailed starlore. This mastery allowed them to mark the passage of time and seasonal shifts with a startling accuracy that was beyond even the astronomical capabilities of the Roman Empire at the time. The wonderful Celtic calendar, dating from the second century CE, found in Coligny, France, in 1897, demonstrates the Druids' significant mathematical and astronomical knowledge. Based on the moon's 19-year cycle, it is an accurate lunisolar calendar that unites the solar year with the lunar months – an astounding feat for the time. Each of the months recorded in the Coligny calendar runs from full moon to full moon, charting the fall and rise and fall again of the lunar rhythm.

Each month was given a dark half and a light half, with the word *atenoux*, meaning 'renewal', inscribed in the middle of the month, suggesting that the month darkened as the moon waned and was renewed at the new moon, after which the month lightened night after night until the moon became full once more at the beginning of the next month. The year was also divided into a dark half and a light half following the same pattern, the dark from Samhain to Beltane and the light from Beltane back to Samhain.

There is much argument about the Coligny calendar and which part of the year it started but the names of the months give us reliable clues that the year began with Samhain, or Samonios, meaning 'summer's end' or 'seed fall', and progressed through the winter to the following spring, summer and autumn. This method of tracking time placed importance upon the inner life, on the emotional and the spiritual, as well as on the ebb and flow of the tides – both of the sea and of women's fertility – balancing the solar pattern of the seasons to create a rich and deeply soulful way for the Celts to relate to the world and to themselves. It's clear the stars and seasons were observed not only for practical reasons, but also for their spiritual lessons: a pattern of increase then decay, followed by rebirth and renewal.

The Coligny months are as follows, beginning on the full moon of each month:

	Coligny month	**Meaning**	**Modern month**
1	Samonios	'Summer's end' or 'seed fall'	October/November

2	Dumannios	‘Darkest depths’ or ‘month of sacred or sacrificial smoke’	November/December
3	Riuros	‘Cold time’ or ‘month for fattening’	December/January
4	Anagantios	‘Stay at home month’	January/February
5	Ogronios	‘Time of ice’ or ‘time of cold’	February/March
6	Cutios	‘Month of winds’	March/April
7	Giamonios	‘Winter’s end’	April/May
8	Samivisionos	‘Time of brightness’ or ‘time of the sun’	May/June
9	Equos	‘Horse time’	June/July
10	Elembiuos	‘Claim time’ or ‘month of the deer hunt’	July/August
11	Edrinos	‘Arbitration time’	August/September
12	Cantlos	‘Song time’	September/October

Each of the names of the months was based upon agricultural and cultural events as much as on spiritual devotions or natural occurrences. This gives us additional insight into the Magical Year as it spirals from one season to the next, which we can apply to our own understanding of the seasons and our seasonal celebrations today. By using our experience of nature as a mirror for our own patterns of increase and restoration we can adapt our celebrations to reflect our own lives and make them relevant to our own needs today as much honouring nature itself and the traditions of the past.

A seasonal compass

The Wheel of the Year can be understood as a continuous cycle of celebration and magic that relates to the four directions and also to the patterns of growth and decrease in our life cycles as well as in the earth’s seasons. Colours, herbs, crystals and other natural objects can also be associated with appropriate positions of this wheel. In this way a web of correspondences can be drawn upon to add extra insights, power symbolism and magic to our celebrations, to help us maximize their effects. These are some of the associations of the Wheel of the Year, but each person will have

their own ideas and each landscape its objects and natural resources that can be added to this list. Feel free to add your own associations over time.

Direction	Festival	Key associations
North	Winter Solstice	Night; earth, winter, age, crossing over into spirit; onyx, jet, granite; holly, all evergreens – cedar, pine; death as gateway to renewal; peace, knowledge; the Cailleach
Northeast	Imbolc	Pre-dawn; first stirrings of new life, emergence, birth; rutilated quartz; snowdrops, pine birch, anemones; white gold and green; candlelight; purity; Brighid
East	Spring Equinox	Dawn; air; new life, childhood; birch, blackthorn, daffodils, primroses; birdsong; yellow, green; exuberance, inspiration, ideas; Eostre
Southeast	Beltane	Morning; youth, sexual emergence, discovery; faeries; bluebells, wild roses, hawthorn; green, red, white; rose quartz; the May queen
South	Summer solstice	Midday; fire; adulthood, power, pride, passion ; roses, honeysuckle, oak; amber, pyrite, gold; red, orange; action; Áine and Gréine
Southwest	Lughnasadh	Afternoon; parenthood; harvest, skill, wholeness, pride, sacrifice; corn, barley; poppies, cornflowers; red, orange, brown; Lugh and Tailtiu
West	Autumn Equinox	Evening; water; maturity, age, the moon, dreams, vision, intuition, emotions, the unconscious; silver, amethyst, aquamarine; brown, gold or water colours, blues and purples; elder, rosehips, blackberries; Avalloc
Northwest	Samhain	Sunset; death, descent, dissolution, spirit, infinity; the blood of our ancestors; honouring spirit and chthonic forces; black, silver, purple; blackthorn, elder, poplar, aspen; Gwyn ap Nudd

Spiritual growth and celebration

Modern life can draw us away from the earth and the changing seasons: we can be overtaken by technology and an endless drive to consume rather than create. Our homes are centrally heated and electrically lit, and we focus our gaze on TV or computer screens where once we sat entranced by flickering fires and the company of our loved ones. Yet the wild world, and a more organic, simpler life is never far away, and we can open our hearts to the

beauty of nature once more. Marking all eight of the ancient Celtic festivals then becomes a continuous cycle of spiritual growth and celebration that deepens our connection to the earth, and makes our lives soulful and seasonally rich once again.

Much is said of becoming 'present' to the wonder of the 'now', and there is no more effective way to do this than stepping outside and touching the earth, letting your body and soul realign with nature's pulse, and finding spirit at last in the sensuality of the wild. Deep snow, spring rain, fallen leaves or the wind in the barley fields – I have always found spirit, divinity, in the wonder of nature. The wild places, the forest, the hedgerow or the green spaces in the city are as full of holiness to me as any temple. Lying back in the meadows of my childhood, I knew that, for me, God was the wind in the trees, the gentle voice of the river.

Growing into adulthood, this sense of the natural cycle stayed with me. Even when I lived in the city, I could watch the rowan trees along the road change from green to gold, observe the stillness of their bare branches in winter, and how they became green and resplendent in the new spring. I have walked the spiritual path of the wisewoman, practising the ways of my Celtic ancestors for nearly 30 years, and the cycle of the seasons remains as fresh and as full of wonder to me now as it ever did.

Celebrating these seasonal festivals is a way to make our relationship with the earth and the world around us conscious and sacred once again. Here is an opportunity to reclaim our natural selves, and rediscover the greater whole of which we have always been a part. This book will guide you through the rich traditions of the Magical Year, with information and practices that can help you realign with nature's rhythms.

- *Discover the old Celtic gods and goddesses, the spirits of nature, and learn how to call them into your own life.*
- *Weave magic and reclaim your power with seasonal spells, charms and blessings.*
- *Explore the changing heavens with Celtic starlore.*
- *Make gifts and decorate your home with beautiful seasonal crafts.*
- *Discover herbal remedies and kitchen witchery to create traditional cures and nourishing recipes to share with friends and family.*

- *Deepen your experience of the Magical Year with guided visualizations and meditations.*
- *And lastly, create seasonal celebrations and ceremonies that are both spiritually rich and joyful, and meet your needs whether you celebrate alone or with a wider community.*

Celebrating the Magical Year

In the pages that follow there are many ways to connect to the seasons and celebrate nature's ever-turning wheel. Drawing on traditional lore for insight, any of the activities can be practised using what you have to hand or with ingredients and materials easily bought or found in nature, at a time to suit you. In the past many of these festivals were celebrated over a week or so, and focused on different specific dates from community to community, or changed over the centuries, so weave these celebrations into your life in a way that works for you, including your friends and family or seeing them as an opportunity for solitude and self-nourishment. Be creative and confident, allowing yourself to customize what you do so that it is meaningful to your own life and the landscape in which you live.

Crafts and recipes

Cooking and crafting can be great fun, and provide a chance to really involve yourself in the seasons in a practical, physical way. Use whatever materials come to hand for crafts, and adapt recipes to suit your tastes and your local produce. Invite friends and other members of your community to cook together as part of your celebration and gather to make decorations for your homes and your shared spaces. These simple forms of practical magic help us grow and bond as community, family and tribe, and create offerings of goodwill and care as well as gifts of art and food to share with each other and to give to the spirits of our land, honouring the old ways in a new era.

Remember, if gathering moss and greenery from the wild, make sure you only take what you need and give thanks to the plant for its gifts.

Visualizations and meditations

You may choose to do the guided shamanic journeys/visualizations in this book either in your sacred space (see page 14), or out in nature, accompanied by drumming or a drumming CD if you wish, or in silence. It important to allow at least 20 minutes for each one and ensure that you won't be disturbed in that time. You may like to record or memorize the journey path before hand, or just remember the key details, as you choose. Start each one of the journeys the same way. Begin by making yourself comfortable, preferably sitting upright with your feet on the ground, as the old Celtic seers used to do. Next, take a few deep breaths, gentle and easy, breathing deep into your belly, and close your eyes. Let the vision unfold before you, first as if you are watching a film, and then, as you go on, engaging with it more and more. There is no need to analyse, and there is no right or wrong way to do it. You may find your journey unfolds differently from the way it is described in the book. Just remember to always return the way you came, visualizing the path in reverse as you return to your body and ordinary consciousness.

For the starlore meditations you may choose to search out the relevant constellation in the night sky if you live in the northern hemisphere, but it isn't essential, as it is possible to tune into these stellar energies wherever you are in the world.

Ceremony and celebration

Seasonal festivals are a wonderful time to get together with friends, family and community. Group celebrations infuse spiritual meaning into social events and serve to bind us together and deepen our relationships by giving us common purposes and insights. We can use all sorts of elements to create our own meaningful ceremonies, depending on who is attending, what we have to hand and how we feel, and this book will provide you with all the knowledge and inspiration you need together with simple templates to create your own holistic rituals and seasonal celebrations. They don't have to be perfect – they need to be fun and loving, events to draw people together.

Celebrating alone is also a wonderful and powerful thing, often allowing us to go deeper into our spiritual selves to foster a connection with our own soul. After your spiritual work is done, be sure to ground yourself by eating and drinking.

However you decide to celebrate, start by choosing a special site. This could be a place in your home or garden, a local community hall or out in nature. If celebrating out in nature, remember that the old gods and faeries remain even in cities, so choose a place of special beauty and atmosphere, as a clue to their presence. You may also want to prepare your space by using the sacred-space ritual and calling in the four directions (see page 14) and decorating it with seasonal crafts and perhaps an altar.

If you are planning a group or community celebration then you may want to get together in the days leading up to the festival to prepare a feast of festive treats to share. You might also like to have a purifying lustral bath (see page 36) and spend some time in contemplation or meditation considering the meaning of the season in your own life.

The eight festivals of the Wheel of the Year can be celebrated in so many ways, so feel free to mark them in a manner that feels true to you. Allow yourself to be inspired by nature and discover your own methods of honouring each one. Initiate your own traditions as well as remembering the old ways, open the windows, step outside and take a little time to feel the fresh air on your face … the wheel has turned.

Blessed be!

Sacred space

Before working on any of the ideas in this book, you may find it helpful to mark the beginning of your celebrations by creating a sacred space in which to work, and also by renewing your connection with nature. Simple practices that acknowledge the sacred in your life and your surroundings can be very powerful.

You can create sacred space anywhere and in any way you choose. You may wish simply to ensure that wherever you are working is clean, tidy and decorated. You may like to light incense or an oil burner to delight your senses, and play some music in the background to create some atmosphere. You may also want to make a seasonal altar as a focus for your activities, or ‘cast a circle’ by calling in the four directions and their corresponding elements.

Calling in the four directions

To help you feel a connection to the landscape around you, take time to look to the horizon at each of the four cardinal points: north, east, south and west. What can you see? (If you are indoors – what lies beyond the walls outside?) In spiritual traditions around the world, the four directions are associated with the four elements:

- *North – Earth*
- *East – Air*
- *South – Fire*
- *West – Water*

Taken as a whole, along with the fifth unseen element of spirit, we have all the ingredients of creation, held in balance and harmony.

Cast a circle by facing each of the four directions in turn, holding in your mind and heart the landscape that stretches before you, and ask that the blessings of each element and direction be with you and all present. You may want to use these words or your own. Whatever feels heartfelt and simple is best.

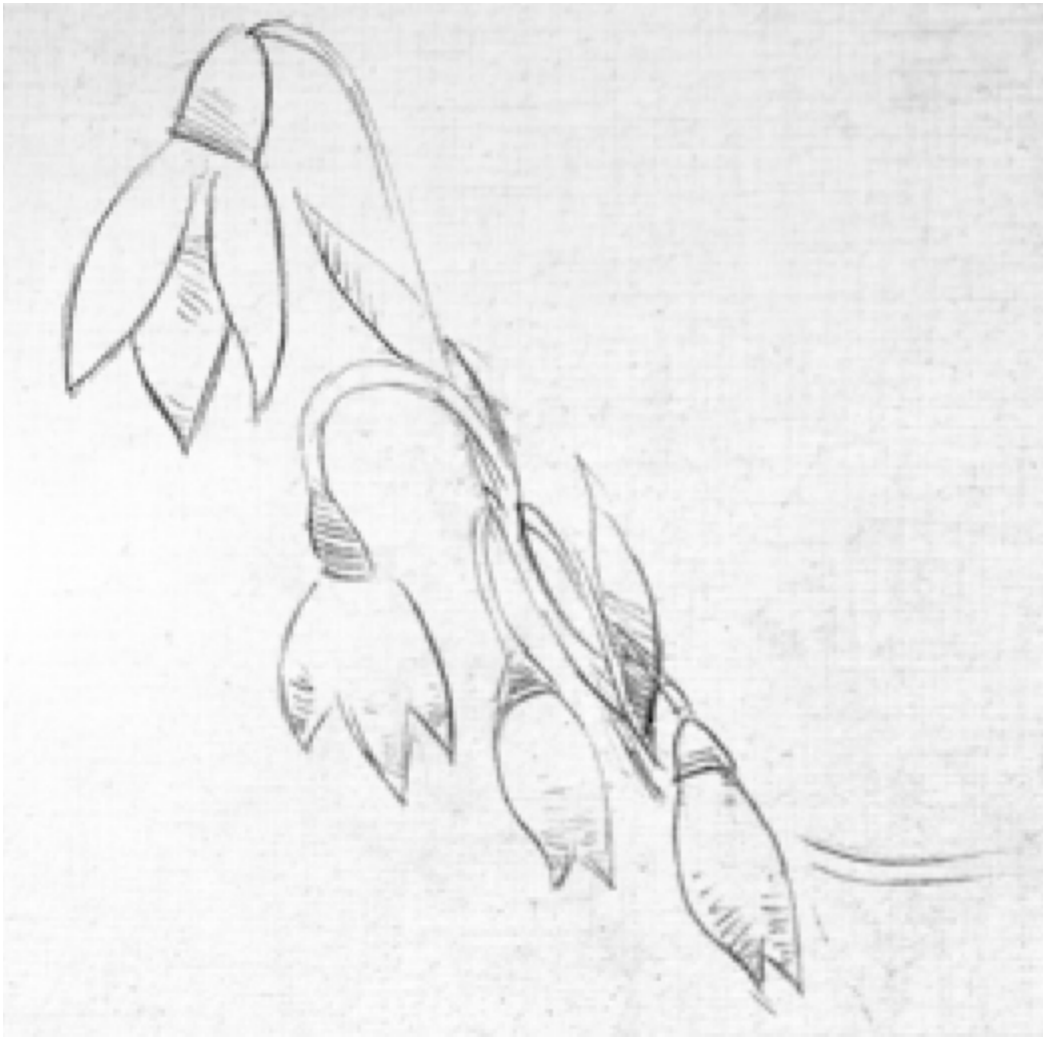
'I ask for the blessings of the north, of earth and stone!
I ask for the blessings of the east and the air, the blessings of the sky and the winds!
I ask for the blessings of the south and the fire, of the hearth, and of the light of the sun!
I ask for the blessings of the west, of the waters, of sea and rain!'

When you have finished your work, remember to give thanks and bid farewell to each direction in turn, and to any other energies, spirits or gods you have called upon, to close down your sacred circle until next time.

You are invited now to dance in the ever-turning wheel of the seasons, discovering the magic of the eight festivals of the Wheel of the Year for yourself in the pages that follow.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER ONE
IMBOLC



IMBOLC – AWAKENING

1–2 February (northern hemisphere)
1–2 August (southern hemisphere)

In the northern hemisphere, the festival of Imbolc marks the very first stirrings of new life. It is a time of bitter weather and biting winds. The days may have been growing longer since the Winter Solstice but it often seems like winter is now at its harshest. The long cold nights of January often weary the spirits and fierce storms are common in February. Yet look closely and glimmers of change can be found in the new buds on the trees and the green shoots of early spring flowers breaking through the frozen earth.

Key Themes

Cross quarter
pre-dawn new life

Celebrating and honouring
awakening
quickening
cleansing
return of the sun
hope
birth
fresh thoughts, dreams, actions
rising sap
the home
family bonds

The animals, too, know that winter's hold will soon be broken, and the first of the year's lambs are usually born on these long cold nights, greeting the dawn of the spring with their first breaths, and giving this festival its name – Imbolc means 'in the belly', referring to sheep who are pregnant at this time, as well as to the fertility of the earth. Another name for Imbolc is Oimelc, meaning 'ewe's milk', which was a valuable supplement to our early ancestors' diet, giving strength to those who were weakened through the winter, such as children and the infirm.

Honouring Brighid and the home

Imbolc honours the home and hearth, as well as blessing the fields for future fertility. Central to the festival is the Celtic goddess Brighid, known also Brigid, Brigit, Brigidh, Bride, meaning 'exalted one'. Another interpretation of her name is that it comes from the Gaelic Breo-Saighead, meaning 'fiery arrow' and signifying her solar aspects. Brighid is the patron goddess of birth, pregnancy, the home and all domestic and dairy-related activities, as well as smith-craft, healing and poetry. In Ireland Brighid is the daughter of the Dagda, 'the good god', and she is said sometimes to have two sisters, also called Brighid, suggesting she is in fact one of many triple goddesses found in Celtic and other European traditions (see also page 163). In antiquity such goddesses are usually three women of similar age but with perhaps different aspects – usually one holding a baby, another a sheaf of grain and a third with some other relevant symbol, such as a scroll to represent knowledge or a bowl of food – rather than the modern triplicity of maiden, mother and crone.

Fed as a child on the milk of otherworldly or faery cows, and often portrayed as milking a cow, Brighid is deeply associated with fertility. She provides ample supplies of milk for the tribe or village that honours her, and her limitless larder means none go hungry. Honouring Imbolc and the goddess Brighid is about strengthening the bonds of home, family and community that are so important at this time. You might want to think of this period as providing sustenance for both your body and your soul after the challenges of a long winter.

Brighid was worshipped all across Britain and Ireland, and is often associated with holy wells and springs, such as Bride's Well in Glastonbury. Brighid is likely to be the same goddess as Brigantia, honoured by the

Brigantes tribe in northern England, and Britain itself is named after her – Britannia is the Romanized version of her name. As such she is also concerned with ideas about sovereignty, both of the nation and in the sense of personal empowerment.

Brighid welcoming ritual

During your Imbolc festivities, you may like to perform a simple welcoming ritual for Brighid, asking for her blessing upon the household for the following year. First make the home as tidy and pretty as possible, fit for an honoured guest, and as dusk approaches, open the front door wide and take a moment to feel or visualize her presence. Then use this traditional welcome or your own words, to welcome and invite her to your home:

> *'The bride has come! The bride is welcome! Goddess Brighid, this is your day, I welcome you to our home, beloved guest. Blessed be!'*

You may also then like to set her a place at your table, or put a glass of milk or wine in a special glass beside the fire for her.

Goddess transformed

With the coming of Christianity, Brighid became transformed, if somewhat demoted, into St Brigid/St Brigit. The church took on her names, sacred enclosures, legends, prayers and characteristics, her associations with fertility making her known as the midwife of Christ. Her holy day of Imbolc remained also, transformed into Candlemas, a remaining vestige of her fire worship. In Anglo-Saxon times, libations of bread and milk were given to the fields on this day, as Saxon practice merged with the earlier traditions. Some scholars now associate Brighid with numerous grain goddesses worshipped across Iron Age Europe, linked to similar practices and symbolism. Brighid's crosses (see page 37), solar wheels made of straw, or sometimes of

willow and wool, are still popular for protection and blessing in Ireland and across Celtic Britain.

Brighid, goddess of the home, healing and poetry

Healing

Brighid and later St Brigit had a sanctuary at Kildare, in Ireland, which was famous for its healers and was likely to once have been a pagan Druidic college. The word Kildare is a modernized version of *cil dara*, meaning 'the church of the oak', suggesting that a great oak tree once stood in the area – a last vestige of the pagan temple before the church claimed the site for their own. At Kildare a sacred perpetual fire, used for healing, blessing and inspiration, was maintained for centuries until it was extinguished in the Reformation in the 16th century. This fire has now been relit, and other Brighid's flames have been kindled from this and are held in numerous sacred places around the world, including at Glastonbury in the UK.

Brighid's mantle

The Brat Bhride – Brighid's or Bridie's mantle – is traditionally a white cloak or piece of cloth used for blessings and healings. At dusk on 31 January, place the cloth outside, over the branch of a tree or bush, and in the night Brighid will pass by and bless it.

The blessed cloth can be used in a variety of ways, but is particularly good to cover those who are unwell or those receiving healing. Smaller cloths can be used dipped in water – especially water drawn from a sacred natural spring – to lave the forehead of those with fevers, or to hold over bruises, etc.

This is good magic to use, especially around children. While it's not meant to compensate for modern medicine, a Bridie's mantle can be a source of great comfort, and bring ease and peace to those in distress, like a magical comfort blanket.

House blessing

Sometimes negative energy naturally accumulates over time in an area. This energetic cleansing ceremony is an expanded version of the traditional house blessing performed at Imbolc. You may find it particularly useful if you have had a harsh winter, have just moved home or just want a new start.

You will need a fresh white candle in a good sturdy holder that you can move about easily, and a handheld mirror. First see to it that everywhere is clean and tidy – floors swept and any dust and, especially, any cobwebs, wiped away – so that you are ready to welcome the goddess Brighid into your home. Starting at the kitchen table, take your candle and light it with a new match. As you do so, ask Brighid to bless the flame, and that it may represent her power. Use the following or your own words:

> *'Great goddess Brighid, keeper of the flame, I ask that you bless this candle. May it be a sign of your presence and power, clearing away all negative energies. Blessed be!'*

Think of Brighid's perpetual flame at Kildare and see this flame as one seed of that great fire. Then take the mirror and angle it so that the light of the flame is reflected in the mirror. Move the mirror about so that the light it reflects dances in turn upon each wall of the room, in every nook and cranny, on every shadow. In your mind's eye, empower the flame by trusting in Brighid, and visualize it burning away and transforming all negative or stuck energy.

Take the candle to each room and repeat the process, so that the light of Brighid reaches every corner of the house, from top to bottom. The mirror takes the energy of the candle to another level, the reflection world seen within it being the spirit version of the room you are in. However, it is also possible to perform the same blessing by just moving the candle around.

When you have gone around the whole house, set the candle somewhere where it can safely burn all the way down. Don't blow it out, as this releases all the negativity again. Let the candle take its time, and when you look at it, see in your inner eye how it is consuming the stagnant life force that the home has accumulated over the winter and transforming all stuck patterns of the household. Thank the fire spirit present in the candle, and thank Brighid especially, for her hard work and assistance. If there is a candle stub left when the wick has burned through, bury it in the earth when the magic is done.

Rising sap

In the Hebrides, folklore refers to Brighid doing battle with the Cailleach or hag of winter and bringing the thaw (see page 227). At Imbolc the life force of the earth is just beginning to awaken as the wheel of the year begins its ascent toward the Spring Equinox: the sap is rising in the trees; the seeds are starting to germinate. This is symbolic of what is happening in our lives, too, as we anticipate the year ahead and make plans and resolutions for the future. These are sacred to the goddess Brighid. Her link with fire and the resurgence of life force at springtime suggest a Celtic version of the Indian concept of kundalini, which can be understood as energy rising up through the earth as well as through our bodies. Kundalini is often symbolized by a serpent, which is one of Brighid's sacred animals, and signified vitality, health, sexual potency and the phallus to our ancestors.

The shield of Brighid

We, too, can honour Brighid at this time to nurture our fertility or productivity for the year ahead, calling her to be a spiritual midwife to our own life, birthing our potential as we grow in tune with our heart and spirit. Brighid can be contacted in many ways. For example, you might want to meditate on her qualities of birthing, healing and domesticity, or light a white candle in her honour or call upon her as the women used to not so long ago, for protection. There are also traditional charms to use to ask her for assistance; the one below, the 'Descent of Brighid', is from *The Carmina Gadelica*, the collection of Gaelic texts compiled by Scottish folklorist Alexander Carmichael in 1900. Visualize Brighid before you (she is usually pictured with red hair and a green dress) as you raise your arms in invocation and say:

'Each day and each night,
That I say the Descent of Brighid
No fire shall burn me,
Nor sun shall burn me,
Nor moon shall blanch me.
Nor water shall drown me,
Nor seed of faery host shall lift me,
Nor earthly being destroy me.

I am under the shielding
Of good Brighid each day
I am under the shielding
Of good Brighid each night
Each early and late
Every dark, every light.
Brighid is my comrade-woman
Brighid is my maker of song
Brighid is my helping-woman
My choicest of women, my guide.'

A bed for the bride

As part of the Imbolc celebrations, Brighid was represented by a corn dolly, which was prepared and dressed as a 'bride' by the women and paraded about the houses before being led to her marriage bed, where she was lain for the night next to a phallic acorn-tipped wand, representing her lover, the god of fertility. Together they would bring life back to the land, and to 'bring in the bride' was to bring her blessings and protection into the home, and to enlist her power to banish any ill will or misfortune that may have gathered through the winter.

Today, 'a bed for the bride' could be a made-up guest bed or a basket by the fire, with a white blanket in which a cloth Bridie doll (see page 38), corn dolly (see page 205) or Brighid effigy could be placed. A bed made for the night on the sofa is also a good gesture of welcome.

The acorn-tipped wand, often made of birch, is known as the white wand. Frequently thought of in modern goddess circles as a symbol of Brighid's power, this is in fact the last sign of her forgotten husband, the god of fertility banished from Christian practice when she became a saint. In some stories he is Bres the Beautiful, who holds the secret knowledge of agriculture and so, like Brighid, is associated with the fertility of the land. In other tales, he is the Dagda, the good god. Either way, Brighid's balancing partner is surely her lover and the father of her children, by whatever name. The phallic wand of Brighid holds the male, fertilizing magic which, when used together with her female magic, blesses the home and all within it, and brings the blessings of spring. For new life, of any

kind, there must be both male and female, and so it is important to remember the white wand at Imbolc.

Making a white wand

Today, skilled woodcarvers still create beautiful white wands, some decorated with a phallus on the tip, as well as with snakes, leaves, acorns and other symbols. All you need is a stick or small branch that is straight and sound. Oak, holly and hazel are all good woods to use. When gathering the wood, ask Dagda to bless the branch and request that it may bring the male fertile magic into the house with it.

You may also wish to sand down the wood before varnishing or painting it. Traditionally, the wand was wrapped with red and white ribbons. The colours red and white recur in British mythic imagery; for example, there are red and white roses, dragons and streams or rivers. Red and white rivers may represent breast milk, tears, semen and blood or menstrual blood, symbolizing the sacred polarities of male and female, positive and negative, and referring to the divine tension and cycle of creation and destruction that governs all things.

A white wand

Attach an acorn or a pinecone to the top of the wand by cutting a slot in the wood, before gluing it and/or binding it into place with cord or ribbon. Finish by charging your wand with the god's energy by making any prayers to it you choose, allowing your words to express your feelings and intuition.

Celtic starlore at Imbolc

Seeing the Milky Way stretched out encircling the horizon, our ancestors would have understood that they were held in a divine cauldron, within which the very ingredients of life were stirred with the turn of the seasons.

At Imbolc the long nights are still with us and the winter stars can be especially bright. At these times the heavens seem to take on a dramatic quality, attracting our attention as the world below slumbers beneath the soil. Start by finding Orion's Belt, to the south and west in the northern hemisphere, and then follow the line of the belt upward to find a bright red-orange star. This is Aldebaran in the constellation of Taurus the Bull. In the Celtic tradition, bulls (known as *tarbh* in Gaelic) are sacred to the goddess Brighid, associated with the earth, fertility, virility and wealth. Bulls feature widely in prehistoric rock art and their skulls were placed prominently in ancient burial chambers, perhaps as totems to bring the dead back to the living in due course, just as spring returns after winter.

During the winter nights our galaxy, the Milky Way, is also especially visible as a band of shimmering stars that 5,000 years ago would have appeared to encircle the horizon during winter. It has been suggested that the Neolithic stone circle and henge at Avebury in Wiltshire were built to align with the appearance of the Milky Way at a time when it held this position.

Known as Caer Gwydion in the Welsh tradition, the Milky Way has for millennia been associated with milk and whiteness, symbolizing fertility and blessedness all around the world. The Greeks believed it was formed by the spilled breast milk of the goddess Hera, and called it the Galaxias Kyklos, meaning 'the milky circle', while to the Romans it was known as the Via Lactea.

Milk is seen as a magical substance in traditions all around the world, and Brighid's associations with milk as well as with fire reveal her connection to the very primal form of fertility, the energetic, alchemical streams that combine to make life itself, often associated with the colours red and white (see page 27). This is perhaps the key to her power; in combining these energies she is able to transform or overturn the magic of the Cailleach, the old woman of winter, to forge life anew and bring the spring.

Imbolc stellar meditation: Treading the wheel of ages

In this meditation visualize the Milky Way as our ancestors perceived it – as the rim of a divine cauldron in which life itself was created with the turn of the seasons.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes gently relax behind your closed lids, and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are walking across a field of white snow in the black of night. Above you the canopy of the stars shines dazzling bright, like a scattering of diamonds.

Tall, pale shapes loom out of the darkness and you see that you are walking between huge standing stones. The ground beneath you thrums to the beat of a great, slow drum, and ahead you catch the glimpse of a flickering fire, sending sparks high up into the night. Others tread the path ahead and behind you, men and women, all approaching the fire, walking to the beat of the drum that you can hear but cannot yet see.

The path slowly rises over a wide hill and, as you reach its summit, you see ahead of you a great enclosure of shimmering stones, each far taller and wider than a man, carved of pale rock. Within the circle is a vast host of men and women, each carrying a flaming torch, and in the middle a huge bonfire, fed by logs the size of tree trunks.

Taking your turn, you enter the circle and are led to the centre. A man stands by the fire drumming upon a stone cauldron covered with a tight skin. Another holds a tall staff with a mace head upon its end, carved into the form of a howling face with wide-open eyes. The man with the staff places his hand upon your shoulder, and turns you to look at the sky. The tall stones that shimmer in the darkness are met in the sky with a wash of white and glimmering stars in a vast belt, like a pale dragon coiled around the horizon, the rim of the cauldron of life. So perfectly does the line of the stones fit with the peaks and dips of the horizon and the wide wash of stars that the earth and heavens seem to merge one into another, without separation, as if one could step out of the circle and out across space.

Take a moment to look around you and see the circling stars as a whole wheel of infinite size and take in their wonder for a while. They may speak to you in their own way if you are open to their messages.

When it is time, the man with the staff hands you a flaming torch, and you join the procession walking around the circle. Your steps fall easily into the slow beating rhythm of the drum and your heart is light within you. You are

met by others, men and women, each taking a place as near as they dare to each other, raising their torches high overhead. As you tread the wheel of the circle, a strange thing begins to happen. Your feet at first crunch upon snow, but as you progress around the circle the snow melts, and the grass peeps through just as the sun rises in the east. You continue in your procession, and to your amazement the grass grows tall and flowers spring underfoot as the sun trails overhead, spinning across the sky, before disappearing into fading light in the west. There is sudden darkness before it appears again – rising and falling again, and again. Light flickers and is followed by darkness at great speed, impossible to follow. The grass slows its growth and the flowers fade and wither, and the soft meadow turns crackly with autumn leaves, before once again you feel snow beneath your feet. Over and over as you tread the wheel the seasons turn, and the great wheel of the stars all around turns with you. You feel the pull of their slow spinning, as if they are the spindle and you are the thread, your steps the churning brew in the cauldron of life itself.

In time the snow melts once more and you see the dawn glimmer on the horizon. Your steps take you from the dead of winter to the first tentative signs of spring to come, and you know it is time to step out of the circle. The man with the staff guides you to its edge, takes your torch and bids you farewell. Thank him for this night's wisdom, before returning the way you came, between the stones over the hill, and back to your everyday world. The wheel has turned and your steps now take you ever nearer to the new day and the spring waiting just over the horizon.

Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always, before wriggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes as you return to the everyday world. You may need to ground yourself carefully after this exercise by eating and drinking and taking your time to feel yourself back in your body.

Giving back to the natural world

Late winter is a time for allowing your imagination and creativity to envision new ways of working with or relating to the great outdoors. Give back to nature a little and put seed and fresh water out for birds and any

other wild animals in your area, and leave piles of leaves or logs outside as places for creatures to shelter.

Seed balls for the birds

Fat balls and seed cakes are an essential supplement to support wild birds at this time of the year when finding food can be hard, especially in urban areas. Helping wildlife wherever we live is an important part of any nature-based spiritual path, reminding us that we are all interconnected and that we have a responsibility to care for the earth and all living things. Taking time to consider how we can help life flourish is both humbling and empowering, especially at this cold dark time of the year when nature may feel hard to contact but often needs us the most. The following recipe will make about 10 seed balls.

You will need

- *250g/9oz/1¼ cups lard or suet*
- *500g/18oz/2½ cups of any of the following, in any combination: sultanas (golden raisins), currants, cake crumbs or breadcrumbs, oats, seeds, peanuts (never salted), grated cheese*
- *10 yogurt pots or plastic cups*
- *1 ball of twine or string*
- *Scissors*

Start by placing the lard or suet in a large saucepan on a medium low heat, and heat until thoroughly melted. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the dry ingredients until thoroughly combined.

Pierce a hole in the bottom of the yogurt pots, and thread through a length of string or twine about 15cm (6in) in length, so that it extends out of both ends by at least 7.5cm (3in).

Divide the mixture between the yogurt pots, pressing it down firmly into each one, before placing in the fridge overnight. Be sure to leave the string extending out of the mix.

When the mix is set, remove from the fridge and gently cut away the pots. The string can then be used to hang the fat ball from a tree, hedge, birdfeeder or other suitable place.

Make an offering to Brighid and the spirits of the land

The tradition of making offerings goes back to pagan times and folklore is full of little charms and rhymes showing how this practice changed and developed over the years. At Imbolc, offerings are usually made of milk and cream, as these are sacred to Brighid, and help to connect us more fully with the land and the season, as well as encouraging us to give back to nature.

If you wish to make an offering, place a small bowl of milk, cream or butter, or a few oatcakes, either just outside your door or in a pleasant spot in your garden. Calling upon Brighid and 'all good spirits' offer them this food, asking for their blessing and kinship for the growing year.

Seeking fire wisdom

We all need inspiration and a chance to heed the voice within. Imbolc, when the year quickens into new life, is a traditional time to try fire divination to seek wisdom and inner vision to guide your steps for the months ahead. Divination can be understood as guidance from spirit, but what we sometimes underestimate is how much our own inner promptings guide and interpret what we glean from the experience. We are always in control of our destiny and divination simply helps us to navigate with clearer insights.

Fire divination

To try fire divination, simply light a fire or a plain white candle, using a fresh match, in a draught-free place. As you light it, give thanks to the newborn spirit of the fire or flame before you, and ask for its assistance, that you may have a glimpse of what will be. Perhaps try speaking these words:

'Spirit of the fire and the flame, I thank you for your guidance and blessings. Please show me your wisdom, and illuminate the path before me. Blessed be!'

Then get comfortable and settled, and allow yourself to rest your eyes upon the flame, in a peaceful state of calm presence.

Let your eyes rest without focusing too hard, and share your thoughts, feelings and secrets with the spirits of the fire. In time you may see shapes, images and symbols in the fire or among the embers. Watch for the body language of the flames, its mood and responses to you. You may find words come into your mind, perhaps suggested by the sound of the flames, but look for meaning beyond words and allow yourself to extend your feelings and notice the subtle nuances of the fire's communication, the expression in its dance or its stillness. Take your time. Divination cannot be rushed or taught, but only experienced by befriending the spirits of flame and fire, of hearth and heart.

Never blow out a magical fire or candle flame; either snuff it out or wait till it has burned down safely.

Brighid's fiery arrow

As we have seen, Brighid's name is likely to come from the Gaelic Breo-Saighead meaning 'fiery arrow', and this can be understood as relating to the divine rays of the Awen, a symbol that stands for many sacred triplicities in the Celtic tradition, such as mother, father, child, but in relation to Brighid can be seen as representing her three sacred aspects: inspiration, healing and the hearth or forge. Calling upon these three aspects brings a special, alchemical balance to our lives that can have profound effects on our spiritual paths and wellbeing.

To call in inspiration is to begin to see our life infused with spirit, to discover a new or renewed vision for greater creativity on all levels. To call in healing is to resolve the things that hold us back or limit our potential. We all have parts of our lives and bodies that need healing, and to give this aspect of ourselves a boost at this time of the year sets us up for a more empowered and happier future. To call in the blessings of the hearth or the

forge at this time summons greater positive energy for our families, friends and communities, with all our relationships strengthened and blessed.

Candle magic

Try this simple candle spell to call in Brighid's blessings. Taken as a whole the three 'rays' described above, each represented by a candle, create a wave of positive energy that can touch every aspect of our lives and those around us, to create a true fresh start.

Take three new white candles of equal length, and using a knife inscribe upon them,

- *Inspiration*
- *Healing*
- *Hearth (or forge, if you prefer)*

Anoint them with a few drops of perfumed oil, and light them each in turn, calling upon the goddess Brighid as you do so. You may like to say these words or your own:

> *'Great Brighid, she who is three, I call upon you to bless these candles, and bless me. By the light that they bring, may the sacred gifts of inspiration, healing, and hearth come to me. So mote it be.'*

As the candles die down, so these qualities will be drawn into your life. You may choose to snuff them after a while, and relight them the next day, and so on until they have burned down. If so, reaffirm your intention each time you light them.

Lustral bath

Imbolc is the festival of birthing and preparation for the year ahead, so a good time for purification rituals of all kinds. At this time we are embarking on the new life that we have dreamed of over the winter. All fresh starts should begin with purification, with literally making things clean once

again, just as the snow may blanket the earth at this season, making the land as white as a new page. A lustral bath cleans away the energetic accumulations of winter and renews us in body and spirit.

First, gather some spring water, preferably from a natural well or spring (but bottled will also do), and add this to your bathwater, along with a handful of dried milk powder (milk is an excellent moisturizer and sacred to Brighid) and/or some dried herbs or leaves tied in a muslin bag, pouch or handkerchief. Vervain and sage are traditional cleansing and purifying herbs in the Celtic tradition, as is juniper, mugwort, lavender, chamomile and fresh birch leaves.

Taking three deep breaths to calm and centre yourself, stir the bathwater in a deiseil (clockwise) direction, and visualize warm, golden sunlight infusing the water. When you are in the water, you may like to use the following traditional incantation:

'I am bathing my face
In the mild rays of the sun,
Sweetness be in my mouth
Wisdom be in my speech.
The hand of Brighid about my neck
The hand of Brighid about my breast
The hand of Brighid laving me
The hand of Brighid blessing and protecting me.'

Take some time in the bath to feel yourself really washing away past negative habits and mental and emotional patterns, as well as any stuck energy or emotions that may have accumulated around you over the winter. When you are ready, visualize yourself as being fully cleansed and blessed.

Imbolc crafts

There are many traditional crafts associated with Imbolc and the goddess Brighid, which make use of materials found at home or in the garden to weave simple cottage magic. Brighid's crosses and Bridie dolls are excellent charms to honour the goddess and bring protection and blessing to

the family and the home, as well as being great fun to make on rainy days or long dark evenings.

Brighid's cross

Brighid's fiery nature can be seen in her ancient symbol, the Brighid cross, which is a traditional charm for good luck and protection. Easy and fun to make, a Brighid's cross invokes the blessings of the goddess and brings the energy of the sun into the house for health and happiness. It is simply made using reeds, straws, raffia or even pipe cleaners or strips of bright stiff card. Whatever your raw material, you'll need about 28 straws or strips of about the same length – about 30cm (12in) generally works well.

If necessary, soak the straws for an hour or two so they're bendy. Pat them dry with a towel.

Take two straws and cross one over the other in the middle to form a plus sign.

Then fold one straw over the other, to form a capital T.

Turn the straws 90 degrees clockwise, and fold down the other straw, to make an upside-down capital L shape.

Turn the straws 90 degrees clockwise again, and add a third straw by placing it to the left of the vertical folded straw, under the horizontal. Fold that to make another T.

Turn the straws 90 degrees clockwise again, and add another straw to make a plus sign again and repeat steps 2–5 above.

Continue adding and folding straws in the same way, going around in a circle, keeping them flat next to each other and building the weave outward. When all the straws are added, tie off each arm with thread, trim and tidy.

Charge and consecrate your Brighid's cross in your circle or sacred space by wafting it with incense and presenting it to the four directions (see pages 14–15). Visualize the goddess Brighid before you, dressed in green and with red hair, and ask her to bless, charge and empower it for your use.

Bridie doll

Traditionally, Brighid was often honoured with a corn dolly and there was a time when almost every British house had one of these wonderful craft objects in it somewhere. Making a Bridie doll from cloth, however, is an even simpler way to honour the goddess.

Simply cut two identical ‘doll’ shapes out of cloth and sew them together, filling the doll with wool, scraps of material, oats or lavender flowers when it is just over three-quarters stitched, before sewing up the remainder. Buttons, beads or even crystals can be sewn on to make eyes, if you like, and another piece of cloth tied around the neck to make a cloak.

One important thing to remember when making and using a Bridie doll, is that this is an effigy of the goddess, and as such, a sacred object.

It doesn’t have to be perfectly made, or expensively bought, but it does need to be loved and treated with care and respect.

Brighid dolls can also be used as ‘worry dolls’ at other times of the year, to tell your troubles to as a form of simple magic – ask for her assistance and she will hear you. When not in use, a Brighid doll should either be put somewhere in a place of honour, such as high shelf overlooking the room, or carefully wrapped in cloth and stored away carefully until the next Imbolc.

An Imbolc altar

Try placing a fresh white cloth on a table and decorating it with pots of the earliest spring flowers, such as narcissi and snowdrops. You could also add white or green candles, as well as Brighid crosses and perhaps a Bridie doll. A pretty glass of milk or a bowl of cream would also be suitable as an offering to place out on the land every day or so, reminding us of Brighid’s generosity. Be sure to replace the milk and flowers often so your altar stays fresh.

Kitchen witchery at Imbolc

Imbolc is a time of sacred domesticity, and cooking and sharing delicious food is an excellent way to bring cheer into a long wintry day. Enjoy some homemade butter on a slice or two of bannock (see page 41) by the fire, with a small glass of Celtic cream, to honour Brighid and offer some warmth to friends and family.

Homemade butter

Butter and other dairy produce are sacred to Brighid and so traditional fare during Imbolc celebration. Dairy foods are very comforting during the cold season due to their high fat content, and were a crucial part of winter diet in the past. Making your own butter as part of your Imbolc preparations, or as a sacred task dedicated to Brighid, is surprisingly simple – all you need is some fresh cream and a blender. If you don't have a blender, you can whip it by hand, or shake it in an airtight jar, although this will take much longer. A pint of cream will give about 225g/8oz/1 cup of butter.

You will need

- *480ml/16fl oz/2 cups cream*
- *Pinch of salt (to taste, optional)*
- *Pinch of sage or thyme (to taste, optional)*
- *2–3 edible flowers to decorate, e.g. violets or calendula (optional)*

Place the cream in a blender and whiz for 3–4 minutes, until the cream thickens and forms stiff peaks. Blend again for another 3–4 minutes, or until the cream takes on the consistency of cottage cheese, as the buttermilk separates from the fat.

Continue blending until the cream has solidified into fat then pour off the buttermilk. You will get about half the amount of butter to the amount of cream you use, and the remainder will be buttermilk that can be drunk or used in baking and cooking. Buttermilk, like butter, is an excellent offering to Brighid at this time.

The butter now needs 'washing' by placing into a fresh bowl and pouring iced water over it. Use a spatula or a large spoon to press down on the

butter and keep it together, then pour off the water and repeat the process until the water runs clear.

Finally, you may choose to add salt, or herbs such as sage or thyme. Using a spatula pat it into shape. You may choose to decorate your butter with herbs or edible flowers, such as violets or calendula. When it's done, wrap the butter in baking parchment or place it in an airtight container.

St Bride's bannock

Bannock or pan bread is an ancient type of flatbread made by the earliest civilizations, originally using barley or oatmeal dough, cooked upon a 'bannock stane' or stone. Later, a griddle or pan was used. At Imbolc a St Bride's bannock or bonnach bride was baked and given to the young girls as a blessing. One was also left outside as a gift for St Bride/St Brighid when she passed in the night to bless all the homes (see page 23). Bannocks make excellent offerings to leave out on the land to the goddess at this sacred time. This recipe serves four.

You will need

- *450g/1lb/3¼ cups plain (all-purpose) flour*
- *1 tsp salt*
- *2 tbsp baking powder*
- *85g/3oz/⅓ cup butter, melted, plus extra for cooking*
- *360ml/12fl oz/1½ cups water*

Place all the ingredients in a large bowl and combine with a fork to make a ball of dough.

Turn the dough out on a floured surface and knead for about 15 minutes. This is a good point to charge your bannock with positive energy, perhaps by saying a prayer over it honouring the goddess Brighid, or chanting a simple goddess rhyme while you knead, to imbue it with blessings.

Gently roll the dough into a ball and flatten with the heel of your hand into a circle, until it is about 2.5cm (1in) thick.

Place a drizzle of melted butter into a large frying pan on a medium high heat. When hot, place the bread in the pan and cook for about 15 minutes each side. Alternatively, the bread can be placed on a greased baking sheet and baked in an oven preheated to 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4 for 20–30 minutes or until pale golden.

Celtic cream, St Bride’s bannock and decorated butter

Celtic cream

Milk and cream are both sacred to Brighid, and this warming tipple is both delicious and perfect for an Imbolc celebration – or to have on any cold evening.

To make 1 litre (35fl oz), you will need

- *1 tsp almond essence*
- *1 tsp vanilla essence*
- *1 tsp coffee powder, dissolved in a little hot water*
- *250ml/9fl oz/1 cup fresh cream, warmed*
- *400ml/13½fl oz/1½ cups condensed milk*
- *350ml/12½fl oz/1½ cups whisky (or to taste)*

Place the almond and vanilla essences, dissolved coffee powder and hot cream into a large bowl and combine well, before leaving to cool completely.

To the cooled mixture, add the condensed milk and whisky. Blend or stir vigorously with a wooden spoon, in a deiseil (clockwise) direction.

Before serving you might like to ask Brighid to bless the potion. Hold the bowl aloft and try these words:

> *'Goddess Brighid, mistress of the milk and cream, bless this drink, in your name. May it bring us warmth and cheer. Blessed be!'*

Return of the sun

At this time of year it sometimes feels as though winter still grips the land, and the weather may be fierce. But if we seek them out, there are signs of new life stirring all around, even beneath deep snow. New shoots will be beginning to show in many plants, and for those of us out early, the dawn chorus of birdsong will be growing noticeably louder and last for longer as the days visibly lengthen. Catkins, the flowers of the hazel, appear by mid February, and are followed by those of the willow. These pale green tassels blossom before the leaves sprout and provide an early sign of the spring. If

you cut a few whippy branches now and place them in a vase inside your home, they will come into leaf early, providing some extra spring cheer.

Try to take some time out in nature during Imbolc and you'll be amazed at what you find, even in a city park. Breathing slow and easy, try to be as present as you can to the simple act of walking, one foot after another, the earth beneath your feet and the sky above you. If the winter has felt long and tiresome, or if you feel seasonally affected by the lack of sunlight, take these moments as a gentle meditative exercise to encourage you, day by day. We all have times when winter reflects darkness or depression within our lives, and these first stirrings are nature's gentle medicine for easing our recovery, as well as adding some extra magic to our understanding of the seasonal wheel.

Even for those of us in a positive state of mind, there is something so beautiful about the quality of light on these early days of the year, and the quiet way life returns to even the bleakest landscape, that can nurture and support us, coaxing us gently into alignment with nature's rhythm to find a more relaxed, present and reflective state.

An Imbolc visualization

Try this guided journey to meet with the goddess Brighid in her sacred enclosure, and connect with the transformational energies of the season.

See before you an oak door. Ask that any allies or guides you may have accompany you this festival of Imbolc, as you explore the sacred precinct of Kildare and encounter Brighid's flame.

As you cross through the doorway, your guide meets you. They may take any form, and they will accompany you throughout, even though they may sometimes go unseen. It is a clear, starry night and the air is crisp and cold. The path ahead of you is lined with oak trees – their tall, broad forms reaching into the sky, their deep roots holding the earth fast; they are like a wall of guardians, each lending you their support as you pass. It is late winter, and the ground beneath them is covered with white snowdrops like tiny stars, glimmering in the darkness. You follow the path feeling cool air and gentle rain upon your face, cleansing and refreshing.

Ahead, through the trees, you see the flickering of a large fire, and your heart beats in your chest. You feel the great power of this place tingling upon your skin.

In time the path opens out into a sacred clearing, a temple of the oak. There, 19 priestesses stand in a circle of firelight in the centre of the clearing, hiding the fire itself, their faces bright in the flames and their shadows stretching long and dark behind them. On one side of the clearing is the largest oak tree you have ever seen, a mighty giant. It is decorated with offerings, ribbons of many colours and chimes of thin bronze rods sway in the branches, the dancing flames making them shine and glint in the darkness. As you approach your guide leads you first to the tree, and then to the circle of firelight. Take your time here and explore, feeling deep respect and wonder at this most sacred place.

Eventually the circle of priestesses opens up, and you are allowed a glimpse of the fire itself. The mighty blaze reaches up to the sky, and at once you are struck by a great sense of awe and sanctity. In the flames, but never burning, with arms raised exultant, is the goddess Brighid herself. Serpents snake through the flames and up her arms, and the life force of every living thing around is stirred just by being touched by the light she casts. For a moment she looks into your eyes … and you are blessed. You feel the life force rising up from the ground through your body, and in a quick and bright wave it rises up your spine, and through the top of your head. You feel your whole being alight with her power, with the blessing of spring to come. Hold this feeling within you for as long as you can.

You may also choose to seek guidance here or ask a question, which may be answered by Brighid or by one of her priestesses. After a time you are guided to leave, returning the way you came, crossing back through the oak door. Take time to feel yourself back in your body, wriggling your toes and fingers before moving around.

Remember to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

An Imbolc cleansing ceremony

Imbolc is a traditional time to make a pilgrimage to holy wells or springs, so see if you can find any in your area, and leave it an offering of the first green shoots and flowers.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Choose a special site for your celebrations and add atmosphere by decorating it with fresh spring flowers, such as snowdrops and narcissi in pots, evergreen boughs and candles, perhaps also collecting wood for a fire.

Gather together on the day of Imbolc, or the nearest possible date to the new moon, for songs and hot drinks around a fire. When everyone is assembled, give each person a tea light or a single candle to hold, and light a large central candle asking Brighid for her blessing. Take it in turns to light a tea light or a candle from the central flame, making a wish or a prayer for the spring to come. Children can be helped with this so they handle the flame safely. Place the candles around the central candle until they burn down. Alternatively, they can be snuffed out at the end of the celebration and taken home to relight, reaffirming your prayer as you do so.

When your ceremony is complete, finish with a delicious feast of creamy soups, stews with homemade bread and butter, and some Celtic cream.

Celebrating alone

Begin by having a cleansing lustral bath (see page 36) and creating a sacred space and calling in the four directions (see pages 14–15), before invoking the goddess Brighid using the shield of Brighid (see page 24). In addition, you may wish to call upon your ancestors to bless and support your life and path, or to help with anything that concerns you. Use your own heartfelt words to call upon them, as this is always more authentic and powerful, or you might say:

> *'Ancestors and blessed spirits, guides and allies, please join us and bless us at this sacred time.'*

You may now want to light an Imbolc fire or candle. When it is lit, gaze into the flames and remember Brighid bringing on the thaw after the winter with her great fire, and silently give thanks for this time of transformation.

Feel the fire reflect your own life force, stirring within you and renewing you for the spring ahead.

Now would also be a good time to try some fire divination (see page 33) and the house-blessing ritual (see page 23) to clear the house of negative energies. Or, with fresh candles, you might like to try the Brighid's fiery arrow candle spell (see page 35), as well as the stellar meditation (see page 29) or the Imbolc visualization (see page 44).

A holy well at Imbolc

Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their

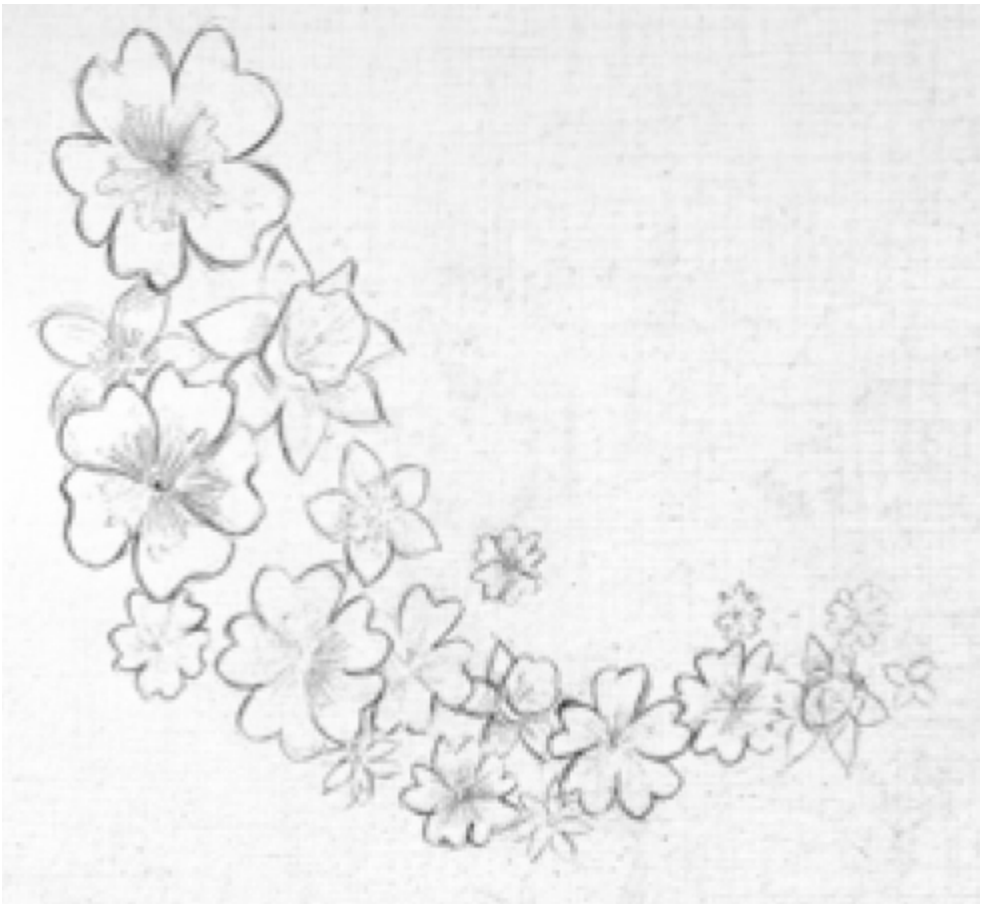
presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, helping us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Imbolc

In celebrating Imbolc we seek clarity and purity to wipe away the energetic detritus of winter, and to support and care for ourselves and others at a challenging time of the year. We look for encouragement, wisdom and inspiration in the first green shoots as they break through the soil, reflecting a rebirth within us with every new day. The first glimmerings of dawn are on the horizon, giving us hope and confidence as spring finally stirs, with all the promise and wonder of its beauty still to come.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER TWO
SPRING EQUINOX



SPRING EQUINOX – BLOSSOMING

20–23 March (northern hemisphere)
20–23 September (southern hemisphere)

The Druids also know the Spring or Vernal Equinox as Eostre, Ostara or Alban Eilir, meaning 'the light of the earth'. This marks the true beginning of spring, when we honour the first greening of the land. It is a festival of balance, when light and dark are briefly of equal length, before the light increases and the days grow longer than the nights. This is as true for the balance of daylight and night as it is for the corresponding areas of 'light' and 'darkness' within our psyches. The inner darkness of the subconscious, as well as the underworld known as Annwn in the Celtic tradition, holds our potential for the year ahead, gestating plans and ideas. Just like the seeds and bulbs beneath the soil, all this new growth is now ready to burst forth into the light and warmth of spring, within and without.

Key Themes

Equinox
balance
equal nights and days

Celebrating and honouring
blossoming
dawn
tipping point
potential
lightness and darkness
exuberance
refreshment

joy
fertility
inspiration

Spring Equinox around the world

Many ancient sacred sites around the world have been built with alignments to mark sunrise and sunset at the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes. These alignments are the same at both equinoxes, as the position of the equinoctial sunrise on the eastern horizon occurs at the midpoint between the positions of the Summer and Winter Solstice sunrises; and similarly equinoctial sunset on the western horizon is at the midpoint between the positions of the two solstice sunsets.

In Britain several long barrows – Neolithic burial mounds – are aligned to both equinoxes, most famously West Kennet Longbarrow in the Avebury complex, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With a history of ceremonial, possibly shamanic use going back millennia, its alignment to the equinoxes most likely marked for Neolithic farmers the time of seed sowing and new life at the Spring Equinox, as well as the descent of the spirits of life and fertility into the earth at the Autumn Equinox. At West Kennet Longbarrow, during the equinox and the days just before and after, the rising sun penetrates the inner chamber, whereas at other barrows with narrower entrances, such as at Loughcrew in Ireland, the alignment is even more precise and the sunrise illuminates only specific carvings on the back walls. Other sites with equinoctial alignments include the Mayan temple of the Seven Dolls at Dzibilchaltún in Mexico, the central tower of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and the Great Sphinx at Giza in Egypt.

Eostre, goddess of spring

Tradition holds that Eostre was the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring and it was she who gave her name to Easter in the Christian calendar. The meaning of Eostre may come from *austron*, meaning ‘dawn’ in Old Teutonic, from the Proto-Indo-European root *aus*, meaning ‘to shine’. Eostre is likely to be connected to the Greek goddess of the dawn Eos, although at the Spring Equinox she is associated with the dawn of the fertile

season, not of the day, and she may have become interchangeable with one of several now-forgotten Celtic goddesses of the rising sap, such as Blodeuwedd (see page 55), who were likely honoured and celebrated at this time.

Eostre is traditionally considered to be a goddess of the moon, her lunar qualities connecting her to fertility and women's menses. Her sacred symbols are the egg and the hare, giving rise to the tradition of decorating eggs and the original Easter bunny. Today, little is known about the worship of Eostre, but enough remains to make her associations clear. In the seventh century the Christian scholar Bede recorded that the month of April was named 'Eostre-monath … once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month'. As Christian scholars were critical of any surviving pagan traditions, we have little need to doubt Eostre's existence, despite Bede's reticence to record further details of her worship. Other evidence suggests that Eostre's main celebrations were at the full moon nearest the equinox.

Blodeuwedd

Another goddess of the spring is the Welsh flower maiden Blodeuwedd, whose name literally means 'flower face'. Created magically from wildflowers and the foam of the sea to provide a bride for the hero Llew Llaw Gyffes by the divine magicians Gwydion and Math ap Mathonwy, she was turned into an owl after betraying her husband with her lover Gronw. The story serves to remind us of the fiercer side of nature, which cannot be owned or tamed and abides by its own laws, not ours. Flower maidens like Blodeuwedd also remind us to honour and respect the beauty of the natural world, and to rediscover the wilder parts of ourselves, which bring renewal and blossoming to our lives as winter turns to the new life of spring.

Invoking the goddess of spring

Anyone can call upon the goddess of spring to bless their lives and those around them, and to encourage fertility and growth, whether in the form of a baby, a romantic connection or a new project. Try this invocation on a fine spring morning, if possible while you're out in nature. Gather some fresh or bottled spring water in a bowl and place a few of the first flowers of the

year, especially primroses, on its surface. Close your eyes, take three deep breaths and feel the new growth all around you. If the weather is harsh and spring is late, visualize it in your mind's eye as a green wave of light, sweeping across the earth.

Hold the bowl of water in your hands up to the sky, and call to Eostre, or Bloddeuwedd, with all your heart:

> *'Gracious queen of the spring, fair maiden of the dew,*
> *Come to me, I pray.*
> *Send me your blessings and your beauty.*
> *May new life surround me!*
> *In your name, fair lady,*
> *Blessed be!'*

Feel the blossoming powers of spring filling you, the sap rising and surrounding you. When you are ready, take a sip from the water and, as it fills you, see it giving you blessings, healing and renewal throughout your whole body, mind and spirit.

Finally, thank the lady and give the remaining water to the earth.

Lady Day

In the Christian faith, 25 March is Lady Day and marks when the archangel Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary to announce that she would be the mother of Christ. In various magical paths, including esoteric Christianity, Gabriel is the angel of the moon, representing the watery realms of intuition, imagination and feminine energies, the female fertilizing and nurturing womb space. Here we see the great goddess in Christian form, birthing divine spirit into physical matter, much as Eostre can be said to birth the spring. Lady Day is thus a good day to honour the divine feminine in any form, as life giver, as pregnant mother of the world.

The hare

Associated with magic, shape-shifting and rebirth, the hare was deeply sacred to the Celts and killing it was strictly forbidden, so much so that this taboo remained until Victorian times, when rabbits but not hares could be eaten. This ban was, however, lifted at the Spring Equinox, when hares could be eaten to share in their fertility and magical power. They were once thought to lay eggs, hence their sacredness to Eostre. The hare is linked to rebirth and intuition, gifts of the underworld that make themselves apparent in the world above at this time.

In folk tales, many witches are supposed to be able to turn into hares. Running madly about the countryside and prone to playing tricks on people and stealing milk, these magical beings have much in common with the faery folk. It was said that only a silver bullet could kill witches of this kind. The hare, milk and silver are all potent symbols at this time due to their associations with the moon and fertility, and these figures may be traces of the old goddess lore still surviving in folk memory.

The hare has male associations, too, with its speed and agility connecting it to the messenger gods and light bringers, such as the ancient gods Thoth, Mercury and Hermes, as well as those slain and risen, such as Osiris. Hermes is often equated with Merlin, or Myrddin in the Celtic tradition, especially during his phase as a ‘wondrous youth’ full of magical potential.

Look out for hares near the equinox: the sight of them ‘boxing’ and running across the fields is a sure sign that spring is here, and a good omen that your coming year will be fertile and fruitful.

Isobel Gowdie and the fith fath

A fith fath, meaning ‘deer aspect’, is an ancient term that refers to shape-shifting. In numerous Celtic ballads and folkloric tales it is a protection and empowerment charm allowing someone to change into animal form (not necessarily a deer). For the reasons given above, changing into a hare was especially preferred by medieval witches and the testament of Isobel Gowdie, tried for witchcraft in Scotland in 1662, contains a fine example of a fith fath focusing especially upon shape-shifting in this way.

Isobel would change her form by chanting thus:

‘I shall go into a hare,
With sorrow and sych and meikle care,
And I shall go in the devil’s name,
Aye till I come home again.’

To change back she would then recite:

‘Hare, hare, God send thee care,
I am in a hare’s likeness now,
But I shall be in a woman’s likeness even now.’

The magical hare

Isobel Gowdie claimed to have received her abilities from the Queen of Elphame, the queen of the faeries, who was said to have also favoured several other witches at that time. This story can be understood as a thread

of the old pagan faith lingering in the modern era; faeries and other beings are part of the wider Celtic spirit nations and integral to a magical practice perhaps going back millennia, and continuing to this day. In this instance the lord of the faeries is the 'devil', in the eyes of Christianity, while the Queen of Elphame is, in many respects, another folkloric version of the old Celtic goddesses.

Shape-shifting, whether physical or spiritual, recalls ancient shamanic and magical practices in which the spirits of nature are emulated as a source of power and healing. In Isobel Gowdie's time there was a blurring of many Christian and pagan practices and beliefs, which coexisted and created hybrid forms all across the remoter parts of the British Isles. Isobel Gowdie is said to have been executed after giving her testimony – in Scotland, especially, those accused of being witches were often burned at the stake.

The Spring Equinox is an excellent time to consider 'shape-shifting' in our own lives, remembering that we can always change, make a fresh start and become who, or whatever, we choose. This might be as simple as beginning a new fitness regime, or becoming conscious of and changing patterns of behaviour or beliefs that are limiting you, or even something like starting your own business. By listening to our bodies and seeing our animal natures in a more positive light, we can also 'return to the wild' and reclaim a more authentic way of being that allows us to really enjoy our lives, and set ourselves free from ideas and constraints that no longer serve our hearts and potential.

Attracting growth: Spirit songs

Songs offered to the spirits of the land are a great way of raising energy and power. The idea is to go into a sacred space and a meditative state of mind, and improvise or call the tune to you moment by moment. It's easier than it sounds and can be helpful when setting new intentions to help you draw fresh inspiration into your life.

First, create a sacred space (see page 14) and begin by intoning the sound Awen a few times, 'Ahhhoooowennnn'. Awen is Welsh for 'inspiration' and a powerful magical word, used by the Druids and Celtic seers to call in the wisdom of the gods and divine prophecy.

With each deep breath and sound, call the spirits to assist you, whether in the form of your gods, your allies, your angels or the goddess of spring. Then allow spontaneity to enter into your intoning, varying the notes and durations, and then expand upon the sounds you make.

It's fine to use noises and sounds rather than specific words. Just experiment and see how it comes out, letting the tune build with simple phrases and repetitions. The aim is to let the spirits guide what you are doing, to hand a certain amount of control over to them, and be their voice – not in any deep mediumistic way, just lightly. Let them inspire you.

This practice can be very healing, as well as empowering. Bringing voice to your intentions can help loosen blocked or stagnant energy, especially in your throat chakra and your chest, and so help attract new ideas into your consciousness, as well as new circumstances into your life. A perfect exercise to perform at the Spring Equinox!

The language of birds

Look out for birds during this season and be open to their behaviour as a sign from the spirit world. The Druids, witches and wisewomen of the British Isles have always taken great care to notice the language and flight of birds, so when one appears in your path, or behaves in a way that suddenly draws your attention to it, take note of where you were going at the time. What were you thinking or feeling?

Many birds have magical associations that can give us clues to their meaning in our lives. The blackbird represents new beginnings and the doorway between the worlds and between the seasons. The owl represents wisdom and the lunar qualities of magic, dreaming and intuition. The wren represents cunning, cleverness and skill, while the raven and the crow have associations with fate and destiny. Most birds of prey, such as hawks and eagles, are seen as messengers of the gods and as being connected to the upper world and a wider, higher perspective.

Other symbols of fertility and rebirth

Eggs are fertility symbols in many cultures and in pagan societies they are associated, like the hare, with the full moon, as well as with the festival of Eostre. The full moon is known to affect fertility, as well as embodying a 'cosmic egg' in the sky.

The significance of the egg during the Spring Equinox reminds us of the new life breaking into creation at this time. We are surrounded by potential, by creativity, by the young and the new and it is possible to ride this fertile current, to 'break out of our shells' into a more vibrant life. Enthused and refreshed by the power of nature, we can let go of things that no longer serve us and step onto a new path of our choosing. The year ahead is vivified, full of possibilities, and so are we.

Another animal prevalent in Celtic fertility symbolism is the snake or serpent (sometimes thought of as a dragon). Often associated with male phallic energy, snakes were also connected to the earth's fertility and the primal life force of creation. The Iron Age Druids had a secret object known as the serpent's egg, which, according to the Roman writer Pliny, was a ball of twisted snakes used for occult purposes. In fact the Druids' serpent's egg was most likely a special stone of some kind, used as a powerful magical tool. The serpent's egg is likely to be related in some way esoterically with the Orphic or cosmic egg, from which the universe is said to be created, and symbolizes the limitless potential and grandeur of both the cosmos and ourselves. Complete within itself, it is a symbol of initiation, as it is twice born – laid and, later, hatched. It is therefore not only a symbol of physical fertility, but also of spiritual fertility – our higher selves emerging into incarnation.

That the world itself is hatched from an egg is an ancient, almost universal idea. In Hindu lore, for example, the egg was laid by a divine bird on the primordial waters, and from it sprang Brahma and the heaven and earth. In Egypt, Ra the sun god comes from a cosmic tree that grew from an egg produced from the mouth of the serpent Kneph.

Rite of balance – becoming conscious of our potential

The Spring Equinox is a good time to consider balance in our lives, not only of happiness and sadness, but also of the areas in which we are active and

passive, successful and falling short, giving and taking. Use this exercise to help you reflect on your deeper needs and gifts, as well as on things you may wish to change and transform at this fertile time of the year.

Stand upright and take three deep breaths. With each breath visualize yourself pulling energy up from the earth and into your body, like warm golden light, until your whole being is glowing. Then stretch out your arms to your sides at shoulder height. Feel the balance, or imbalance, in your body.

Turn to your left side and focus on your left hand. This is where you receive from the world. With every in-breath, you draw in new life and energy. In your mind's eye objects and symbols appear in your hand. What do you see? What do you feel?

These objects and symbols represent what comes to you from the world, what you receive, what you draw in. This would be a good time to ask yourself if what you see corresponds to what you need – to what you desire from the world. Do you receive what is good for you and your whole wellbeing?

Now turn to your right and focus on your right hand. Again objects and symbols appear, and here you see what you give out, what you express or send out to the world. With every out-breath you give back to creation. What do you offer the world? What do you give back to life?

When you are ready and with your hands still out to either side of you, draw your attention to your centre, to your heart. Do you feel a balance between what you give and what you receive? Do you receive energies or objects you do not need and can give away? What do you attract? What can you release?

Spend some time here in quiet reflection, feeling with every in-breath and every out-breath the balance within you.

When you feel it is time to end this exercise, place your hands over your heart for a moment to close down your energy. You may choose to make some notes in a journal and record your insights. In this way you can become more conscious of how you negotiate your way through life, and

make more empowered decisions, attract and call in what you need, and let go of what does not serve you or what you can give freely to all creation.

Celtic starlore at Spring Equinox

The night sky in spring is very much in transition. In the western sky of the northern hemisphere, Orion is now descending closer to the horizon, and will soon be gone for the summer months, while the constellation of Leo the Lion with his warm sunny energy is now high and bright, ushering in the return of summer still ahead. Prominent in the sky is the Great Bear Goddess, or Ursa Major, also known as the Big Dipper, and by following the Bear's tail we soon come to a bright orange star, Arcturus, in the constellation of Boötes the Herdsman, which is only 36 light years away and one of the brightest in the night skies.

The herdsman is a recurring sacred figure in Celtic lore and goes by many names, including the Green Man and the Woodwose as well as those of the hunter gods, Herne, Cernunnos and Gwyn (see page 229). As a wild man he lives close to nature and is often a prophet or a visionary seer, subject to divine inspiration by his immersion in the wild. Boötes doesn't resemble a human form very clearly, but rather looks like a large kite with Arcturus being its bottom point. To the upper left of this kite is the Corona Borealis, or Northern Crown. In Greek mythology it is the crown given by the god Dionysus to his bride Ariadne, but in Celtic Welsh mythology it is Caer Arianrhod, 'castle of the silver wheel'. This is the home of the goddess Arianrhod, who oversees the turning stars and the web of fate, hinting at the unfolding promise of the year ahead.

Returning to Arcturus: a little further down the arc begun by the Bear's tail is the constellation of Virgo, the maiden spring goddess in stellar form. This is low on the southeastern horizon during spring evenings and is recognizable from the curved bowl of its upper section tipping in the opposite direction to Boötes. The brightest star in Virgo is Spica, at the end of the lower stem of the constellation.

Mars, identified by being brighter than the stars, with its distinctive reddish hue, may commonly be seen now travelling along the elliptic (the apparent path of the sun across the sky). This planet is a harbinger of the fierce, vibrant energy of spring and the virile god of the greenwood, who will wed the goddess at Beltane in May as spring turns to summer.

Spring Equinox stellar meditation: Seeking inspiration and a higher perspective

This meditation takes us to explore Caer Arianrhod, the Corona Borealis which can be understood in the Celtic tradition as the hub of the stellar wheel, in order to gain greater perspective on our lives and seek a higher, more inspired viewpoint. Arianrhod means 'silver wheel', referring to the stars' journey across the heavens, and she is an excellent guide to the wheel of time as well as to the stellar realms.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes relax gently behind your closed lids and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are walking along a sandy shore, under a moonlit sky.

The air is cool and still and to your left the sea hushes and rolls lazily upon the shingle, as you breathe slowly in and out, your breaths falling into a rhythm with the sea. You are in a wide bay, and the sky is bright with a white full moon above the ocean and a million brilliant stars.

You feel your bare feet upon the sand as you walk a line between the sea and the shore, the water reaching up and rippling around your toes – cleansing and refreshing you. You lift your head and gaze upon the moon and, as you do so, you see that it casts a path of light upon the waves, and your vision shifts and blurs. The path of silvery light becomes a staircase, rising up into the sky and forming into a slender, silver tower, impossibly high above the earth, crowned with the moon upon its summit. As soon as your gaze reaches the moon again, you feel yourself pulled gently along, out across the water, gliding and rising as easily as a breath of wind upon the waves, higher and higher upon the silvery stair.

As you rise you look up at the heavens and the shimmering stars, and realize that the stair twists and spirals as you ascend, and the stars turn and spin above you, but the tower itself remains still as the hub of a wheel, holding you to it steady and sure.

You come to halt at a tall, arched doorway. It is made of a curious substance – stone or white wood that glimmers like the moonlight – and upon it is a majestic silver wheel with eight spokes, and many tiny details inscribed and

filigreed all over it. As you look closer you see flowers and trees and staring eyes, woven in among animals and strange signs; then the images shift and you see star patterns and astrological signs; and then they shift again and the images vanish, and the pattern is only a million reflections of light and shade upon its silvery beaten surface.

The air is still and silent, but the sanctity of this place is palpable, and you feel a great and ancient presence all around.

The door slowly opens and you step into a wide, circular chamber with a large window in each of the four cardinal directions: north, east, south and west. Everything seems strangely simple and calm after your great spiralling ascent. There are many books on shelves all around and a spinning wheel in the centre of the floor. Sitting at the wheel is a woman. She is straight-backed and slender, working silently with a look of rapt concentration upon her pale beautiful face, a thin smooth thread between her slim fingers.

This is Arianrhod, mistress of the wheel, keeper of the secrets of the stars, and she has much wisdom. ‘Why have you come?’ she asks, in a smooth, cool voice. And you must answer her honestly.

If you are lucky Arianrhod may help you understand the stars or the workings of fate. She may show you how to keep your centre when change is all around you, or she may show you how to change when all is too still. Take this time to be in the presence of the great lady, here in the magnificent temple of the stars.

When you are ready, take a look out of each window in turn, into the vastness of the sky. Here, at the centre, let your senses expand to contemplate the wheeling heavens and the immense arcs of time the earth has known, and the even greater spans of the stars, and then let your awareness turn to your own life, and see the rhythms and the cycles that exist there also.

Here, at the Spring Equinox, the wheel spins from darkness to light and from cold to warmth, and the heavens turn too, with new stellar companions to guide the way. Feel this moment, this shift, from your position of stillness at the axis of the stars, and let the subtle change it brings fill your awareness for a while. Let your perspective be broadened and calmed.

After a while you sense that it is time to return to the everyday world. Give thanks to Arianrhod for all she has shown you, and pass back through the shimmering door. Beyond, the staircase leads you downward with ease, across the dark ocean beneath the stars and back to the beach and the path between the water and the sand. Continue on your way, till your footsteps shift from sand to your everyday home and you feel yourself back in your body, easily and gently.

Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always, before wriggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes as you return to the everyday world.

You may need to ground yourself carefully after this exercise by eating and drinking and taking your time to feel yourself back into your body.

Garden magic at Spring Equinox

Many flower, herb and vegetable seeds can be sown now, either indoors or directly into the soil if it is warm enough. It is also time to sow summer bulbs, as well as to cut back foliage and shrubs for colourful stems next winter. Rosemary, mint, marjoram and thyme plants will all begin to show fresh growth and can now be cut for cooking. You may also see the first shoots of vervain, useful for love and protection spells (see page 135), as well as for lustral water (see page 70), for cleansing and blessing yourself or sacred spaces and objects.

Sacred spring flowers

The primrose (*primula vulgaris*) is sacred to the Norse goddess Freya and to various 'flower maiden' goddesses of the British Isles, such as Blodeuwedd (see page 55), as well as to the faeries. It is also edible, making it a beautiful garnish for spring salads and Easter or Eostre cookies (see page 76).

Magical seed sowing

Sowing seeds now will give you abundant new plants in the coming summer. If space is limited, try salads, calendula or nasturtium plants, which can be grown in small pots on a window ledge. Experiment and have fun awaiting the seedlings that will spring into life.

You can add extra magic to seed sowing by blessing the seeds, infusing them with your energy. First, hold the seeds in your hands and take three deep breaths. Close your eyes and visualize the new life that will come, seeing them as big, healthy plants. If there is something you would like to attract, such as love, health or abundance, see that also coming strongly into your life in the coming months. Visualize your dreams with as much detail as possible. Then, in your mind's eye, see the light of the sun go down into the seeds, until they glow golden, full of magic and life force. At the same time set your intention for what you want to achieve. This is powerful sympathetic magic.

Now take a pot filled with soil or compost and sow the seeds thinly upon the surface, before covering with a fine layer of soil or grit. Then water gently. If the pot has holes underneath for drainage, stand it in some water for a while so the soil can draw the water up from underneath.

Take another three deep breaths and, focusing your intention again, see in your mind's eye the plants growing strong and beautiful, and your desires coming into fruition as they grow. Place your hands gently upon the soil and send the seeds your love and energy, whispering any prayers for your desire into the soil. Thank them for the new life they will bring.

Tend to the plants gently and carefully, see they get the right amount of sunlight and water, and watch them grow, while also taking practical steps in your own life as well, to draw what you wish for toward you. Over the next three months, as the plants come to maturity, so shall your desires. See that these are for the good of all and harm none. Blessed be!

Lustral water

Lustral or holy water has been used for thousands of years for energetic as well as physical cleansing and blessing, transcending cultures and religions. Taking a ritual lustral bath (see page 36), or cleansing spaces and objects,

clears negativity away and is a useful precursor to any spiritual practice, preparing both the mind and the body.

Spring Equinox is, like Imbolc, a good time to make your own lustral water. You will need some fresh or bottled spring water and some fresh herbs. Vervain is especially good, but rosemary, lavender or mint are also suitable for energetic cleansing, as are new silver birch leaves.

Pour the water into a pretty bowl or glass and sprinkle on the herbs or leaves. Leave in bright sunlight for an hour to infuse with the sun's energy, or hold the bowl up to the sun and say this simple prayer:

> *'Good spirits of the spring, and of all growth and blessings,*
> *charge and consecrate this water. Blessed be!'*

Use lustral water to bathe your face or sprinkle it around your body or home for a simple energetic cleansing and blessing ceremony, the perfect magical accompaniment to spring cleaning or to draw fresh energy into your life.

Incense making and burning

In the Celtic tradition, the Spring Equinox is associated with the winds and the element of air, which bring with them inspiration, refreshment and change. This is a great time to try making your own incense or burning some as an offering to the spirits of spring. Burning incense is a potent magical act in its own right and one that can have many purposes, such as to cleanse and bless the home, to honour the gods and to accompany prayers for health and healing. The magically empowered incense ingredients, corresponding to the practitioner's goals, are transmuted via the fire into smoke, which carried by the air spirits permeates the environment and rises up to the heavens, touching everything in its path, and helping to give new life to your intentions.

Many herbs, gums, resins, oils and even crushed crystals can be used in incense blends, whether for their magical correspondences or for their scents or colours. Frankincense, sage and sandalwood are the most popular as they are magically powerful, smell good and don't need to be mixed with other ingredients. There are also many ready-made incense blends

available, some of which have been created with a specific seasonal celebration in mind. Whenever you use incense, always give thanks to the spirits of the incense, the fire and the air, to make it extra magical.

The spirit of incense

For simple, cleansing incense for Spring Equinox combine equal quantities of frankincense, pine needles and rosemary in a pestle and mortar, or crush with a knife on a chopping board. Then add a few drops of violet, hyacinth or lemon oil to the dry ingredients, until you feel the scent is attractive and well balanced. Bless the incense by holding it up to the sun and asking in your own words that the spirits of all the trees and herbs included add their magic to your blend. Thank the spirits, before storing the incense in an airtight container.

Burn the incense safely on a charcoal disc in a censer or other heatproof container, wafting the smoke around the house for a simple energetic cleansing and blessing. Pay special attention to the four directions – north, south, east and west – as well as to the doors and windows.

Spring Equinox crafts

In the Celtic calendar, the Spring Equinox is a time of fresh energy, inspiration and hope, when the entire world seems to be new again. Making a flower mandala is a wonderful meditative practice that encourages gratitude for nature's beauty, while prayer flags are a simple way to send positive intentions across the world with the wind.

Flower mandala

Try celebrating the Spring Equinox by making a simple mandala out of flowers and greenery, or with candles, to place in your garden, at the centre of your sacred space or on a table or an altar.

A good basis for the design is the equal-armed cross, or a sun wheel (a four-quartered circle), because these symbols invoke balance as well as representing the turn of the year. Alternatively, you could make a pentacle or five-pointed star, vesica piscis or triskelion shape. As you create the mandala, remember that every action in its construction is a prayer and an act of honouring and blessing.

The creative possibilities are endless. Begin with four large petals or flowerheads, such as daffodil or primrose petals or anemone heads, and place them in a simple cross shape. Then, using smaller petals or leaves, fill

in the spaces between the arms of the cross. Use another type of flowers or leaves to make a circle around the cross, laying them down in a deiseil (clockwise) direction to attract blessings.

You can continue creating new layers, following a design of your choosing, with flowers and leaves that add different colours and textures. If your mandala is to be used on an altar or as a table centrepiece, you might also choose to add a candle to its centre, which you could light as part of your Spring Equinox ceremony.

Prayer flags

Flags can be used, like Tibetan prayer flags, to send prayers out on the wind, and also to invoke vision and energy, welcoming in the blessings of the air and the upper world, which is especially suitable during the Spring Equinox. These flags can be made very easily by cutting triangles of cloth or paper and then attaching them to sticks or long pieces of string. Choose bright spring colours, like yellow and green, to symbolize the sun and the greening of spring.

Symbols to decorate your flags might include dragons, standing for the return of life force to the world; spirals, representing the turn of the seasons; as well as flowers, triple moons, the sun and sun wheels. Write prayers and messages of hope on them, so that these intentions can be set free upon the spring air.

You can choose to hang your flags from windows or trees to catch the wind, or use them to decorate a sacred space, or even to carry them in procession to a Spring Equinox ceremony. Flags attached to hazel sticks can be stuck into the ground, and you can also use flags as part of a dance. Have fun as you make these sacred offerings to the season, full of the joy of spring.

A Spring Equinox altar

For the Spring Equinox you might like to decorate your space with a green or yellow cloth and spring flowers, especially spring bulbs (which can be grown indoors). Pictures of hares and full moons, and, of course, decorated eggs are all attractive and sacred objects suitable for this time, as are simple

mandalas of flowers and green shoots, and pots of soil within which you can sow seeds with magical intentions. Make space perhaps for incense or an oil burner, which can scent your sacred space with the aromas of spring, such as hyacinth or narcissus.

Kitchen witchery at Spring Equinox

The Spring Equinox is a wonderful opportunity to have some fun and seek inspiration in the kitchen. Fresh seasonal produce abounds and there is sense of optimism in the air. Now is a great time to delight your senses and create some delicious treats and healthful herbal tisanes, such as nettle tea to refresh and renew you, body and soul. The better weather can encourage you to visit farmers' markets or to spend more time exploring the garden, where the herb patch will be springing into life. Look out for what is fresh and available locally to really align with the season. For example, you could seek out locally laid eggs for traditional painted-egg decorations for an equinox feast and to make Eostre cookies for a sweet treat.

Eostre cookies

These lightly spiced, sweet cookies, decorated with colourful icing, are often a favourite with small children but can be given a more grown-up flavour and appearance with little effort. The following recipe makes 15–30 cookies, depending on size, and is based on a traditional recipe.

You will need

- *225g/8oz/1 cup softened butter*
- *225g/8oz/1 cup caster sugar*
- *2 large free-range egg yolks*
- *400g/14oz/2¾ cups plain (all-purpose) flour*
- *1 tsp mixed spice*
- *1 tsp ground cinnamon to taste*
- *2–4 tbsp milk*

For the topping

- *250g/9oz/1¾ cups icing (confectioner's) sugar*
- *1–2 tsp lemon juice*
- *2 tbsp water*

To make the cookie dough, place all the ingredients in a mixing bowl and slowly combine until the mixture forms a stiff dough.

If you are using a cutter, the mixture can then be rolled out on a board dusted with icing (confectioner's) sugar and cut into shapes, such as rabbits, eggs or flowers. Alternatively, cut the dough into equal-sized parts, roll into balls and flatten to create simple circular cookies. Place the cookies on a greased baking sheet and bake at 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4 for 10–15 minutes or until golden brown. Leave to cool.

To make the topping, place the icing (confectioner's) sugar in a bowl and stir in the lemon juice. Add the water, a drop at a time, until the mixture forms soft peaks. Pipe on, or spread over the cooled cookies using a palette knife (metal spatula).

Decorate the cookies with candied flowers or draw designs, such as spring flowers or stars, into the topping while it is still soft.

Nettle tisane

Nettles are highly nutritious and detoxifying, and have been used as a general tonic for centuries. One of the highest sources of iron available, nettles are also a gentle diuretic, capable of flushing toxins from the liver and kidneys, so great for a gentle spring cleanse that supports the whole system. The new nettle shoots should now be out in abundance and will brighten your hair and eyes, clear up skin complaints, relieve heartburn and digestive disorders, as well as easing aches and pains.

To make a nettle tisane or tea, simply add 1 teaspoon of dried herbs, or one fresh nettle shoot, per cup of boiling water and leave to brew for 5 minutes.

Fresh nettles can also be gathered, washed and cooked like spinach, which they also resemble in taste. Once they are wilted in hot water or over an open fire they lose their sting. Herbal tisanes can be given added magical

energy by stirring deiseil (clockwise) with a silver spoon, three or nine times, or any multiple thereof. Draw up energy from the earth and pass some of it through your hand into the pan or mug, using the spoon like a magic wand to direct it into the water.

As you work, try asking for healing and cleansing for your spirit as well as for your body, and imagine yourself really shining and blossoming with health and vigour. Clearly visualize light and blessings going into the brew, and remember to thank the plant spirits of the herbs used for their gift.

You might to try reciting these words as you stir or use your own:

> *'Nettle tisane, nettle tea, lend your spirit to this spell for me, bring me healing, clear my sight, bring me vigour and beauty bright.'*

Decorated eggs

Boiled eggs can be decorated, painted and then eaten as part of a Spring Equinox feast. There is a whole host of lore concerning eggs across Europe, and many traditional regional designs for decorating them, which you might like to research.

You might choose to start by dying the eggs – superb colours can be achieved from various natural ingredients. Bring a large pan of water to the boil and add 2 tablespoons of white vinegar. Then add the natural colour of your choice (see below) and stir well until you've achieved the desired colour. The more of an ingredient you add, the stronger the colour. Then remove the pan from the heat and add as many hardboiled eggs as will fit in your pan.

- *Orange – add 12 onion skins and soak the eggs for 30 minutes*
- *Blue – add half a chopped red cabbage and remove the eggs when the desired shade is achieved*
- *Pink – add four chopped beetroots and soak the eggs for 30 minutes*
- *Yellow – add 3 tablespoons of turmeric and soak the eggs for 30 minutes*

Paint, ink or food colouring can also be used to decorate the eggshells, perhaps with flowers, sun wheels, hares, serpents, flowers, goddesses or

pentacles. Alternatively, glue string, glitter or other items onto the eggshells, or cover them in wax and gently scrape off designs using a sharp craft knife.

Season of blossoming and joy

March often begins cold and stormy in Britain and Ireland with frequent rain, but by the end of the month gentler weather becomes more common. By the equinox the first signs of spring begin to show in abundance in the south, while the north may take a few weeks longer to start to warm, with the greening of the hedgerows only just beginning. At this time, when the earth is cloaking herself in greenery and spring flowers once again, it's worth spending time in reflection and consider what is budding in our lives, what is waiting underneath the surface to be reborn and what skills and talents are ready to bloom.

A Spring Equinox visualization

This guided journey to meet the goddess of spring can help you tune into the turn of the season and seize the opportunity to make a fresh start, whether that be renewing your plans and vigour or, if a clean slate is required, blessing a new beginning in your life.

Visualize before you a simple oak door. You pass through the door into the soft blue light that comes before dawn. The path leads you onward and upward through a deep forest between huge trees, dark and tall sentinels upon either side of you, yet the pale stone of the path glimmers. Eventually you come out into a wide-open expanse. Slowly it is getting lighter, and a silvery mist covers the world all around you.

The ground rises and you climb up and up until you find you are high on a mountain. A cool breeze blows in your face, ruffling your hair. There are other shapes around you, men and women of all ages, silent and wrapped tightly against the cold. Out to the east, to the right of you, the mountain drops away, and the sky is a vast, silvery blue expanse above the shadowed green of the hillside. Take your time here and breathe into the silence, the spaciousness of the dawn, full of power and possibility for the life that lies ahead.

After some time you feel the crowd around you seeming to hold its breath, and you hear the chiming of bells and distant singing, as soaring angelic voices travel upon the wind. Your heart beats faster and tears spring into your eyes. From far out in the east a being approaches. The sun is rising bright behind her. As the light grows, the distant singing becomes clearer. The figure draws nearer and it seems that everything around you is springing into life.

You are struck by the great power and sanctity of this moment, as Spring herself comes close, beautiful beyond imagining, dressed in flowers and rosy hues, her hair golden in the sunlight. Spend a moment now in contemplation and communion with this holy being.

The birds begin to sing and flowers bloom all over the earth. Everything is touched by freshness and new life. A warm glow of youth and vigour rises up your legs and hips, into your belly, into your chest, rising like the light of a new sun up your spine and shining out from your eyes, glowing from your heart. You feel yourself renewed and reborn.

After a time it will be appropriate to return home. Retrace your steps back through the forest, now green and golden in the light of a new day, along the path to the oak door – open it and step through. Take your time as you let yourself return to your body once more. Feel yourself back in the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving about. Remember to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

A Spring Equinox inspiration ceremony

This is a wonderful time for exploring the woods or a local park and looking for signs of spring to cheer the spirit and encourage us on through to the next turn of the wheel.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

You might like to invite friends and family to join together in a pilgrimage to a local hill or a place where you can enjoy the wide expansive views. Such places have often been held sacred and you may even find a beacon or

holy hill near you, where fires were once lit for all the surrounding area to see at sacred times.

When you reach the summit or your chosen spot, share some nettle tea (see page 77) and Eostre cookies (see page 76) to restore your spirits after your trek. You might like to start your ceremony by joining together to make prayers for rejuvenation and inspiration and burn incense (see page 71) to send your wishes to the heavens. You might also like to ask each person to bring some leaves and flowers to make a spring mandala (see page 73), or you could sing songs or read poetry to the land itself, and to the wide skies, as an act of simple and inspirational devotion to fill your heart with the wonder of nature once again. You might also like to fly kites or wave prayer flags (see page 74) covered with words of gratitude and hope for the coming year.

Before you leave your special site, be sure to leave a few Eostre cookies as a gift to the land. When you have returned from your pilgrimage, you may like to gather together and enjoy a feast of seasonal local produce, especially spring lamb and green salads, as well decorated hardboiled eggs and other seasonal treats.

Celebrating alone

In the days leading up to the equinox, you may choose to embark on some magical gardening (see page 69) or make your own incense and prayer flags in preparation. Gather fresh flowers, especially those growing in pots and seek out some beautiful music to add atmosphere. Prepare some food for a special seasonal feast and create an altar as a focus for your activities (see page 75).

A Spring Equinox altar

When it is time to begin, create a sacred space by calling in the four directions (see page 14), followed perhaps by calling in the spirits of your ancestors or any other chosen gods. Here would be a good place to invoke

the goddess Eostre to ask for her blessings and for fresh energy, to seek inspiration and renewal, and to make your life fertile. Invoke her in the way described earlier (see page 56), in any way that feels right to you, or you might say:

> *'Goddess of the spring, lady of new life, we ask you to join us and ask for your blessings at this, the turn of the year. May you bring renewal and hope to all you touch at this sacred time.'*

Give thanks to the goddess of spring and the spirits of the returning green, of the new shoots and of all new life that begins now. Take a moment to feel the joy and anticipation of the growing light and the summer that will come, and make an offering to the spirits of the land, especially if you have a garden to tend, or live in a built-up area, where spirits of the land are often disrespected. Next would be a good time to perform the Spring Equinox guided visualization or stellar meditation (see pages 63 and 66), or make a mandala (see page 73) as a meditation, focusing on what you would like to draw to you, or ask for the earth itself to be blessed, for peace or environmental healing.

Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Spring Equinox

The Spring Equinox can be celebrated in so many ways, so feel free to mark it in a way that feels true to you. Allow yourself to be inspired by nature and discover your own methods of honouring the spring. Initiate your own traditions as well as remembering the old ways. Open the windows, step outside and take a little time to feel the fresh air on your face … spring has come!

Blessed be!

CHAPTER THREE
BELTANE

BELTANE – FERTILITY

1 May (northern hemisphere)
1 November (southern hemisphere)

Beltane, meaning ‘the goodly fire’ or ‘the fire of Bel’, marks a time of revelry in the Celtic spirit. Since antiquity men and women have gathered to celebrate Beltane at dawn during the first few days of the month, or at the nearest full moon to when the hawthorn, the tree most sacred at Beltane, is in blossom. Its importance is such that May Day remains a festival throughout Britain and much of Europe. It is a time when the faery realms interact with us all, granting wishes and playing tricks. It is also the time when the god and the goddess are wed, issuing in a time of increased fertility and the promise of summer ahead.

Key Themes

Cross quarter
virility
sacred union

Celebrating and honouring
fertility
attraction of opposites
beauty
love
sexuality
physicality
sensuality
sovereignty
wildness

In the Celtic Wheel of the Year Beltane is one of the cross-quarter or fire festivals. Associated with the direction of the southeast, the bright morning of the year after the dawn of the equinox, it is a time of burgeoning life, the great wild greening of the earth. During Beltane we can use the fresh energy of the earth's life force to energize and inspire us, to discover where our passions lie and what makes us feel truly alive at this time.

Sacred union of Bel and Danu

The god Bel, also known as Belinus, Belli or Bilé is one of the most ancient in the Celtic pantheon. A god of the sun but also, later, one of warfare and death, he is most often understood as partnered with the primal mother goddess, Danu (Don in the Welsh). Like Bilé he is also associated with the World Tree or Tree of Life. In Celtic times the Druids held certain trees as of special significance, and would honour the largest or oldest tree in an area, usually an oak or a yew, as a living World Tree. Later in Celto-Roman times this idea was expressed in the Jupiter columns – carved stone pillars topped by a statue of the god Jupiter and often decorated with oak leaves, which represented the union of heaven and earth.

Belinus was worshipped all across the Continent, particularly in France, Austria and Italy, as well in Ireland and Wales, and some scholars believe he can be traced back to the Phoenician God Baal, which means 'lord', while Bel in Gaelic means 'bright'. However, the goddess Danu is even older, mentioned as already ancient in the Indian Vedas – which are based on an oral tradition that dates back to 10,000 BCE. Danu means both 'knowledge' and 'river', and is sometimes interpreted as meaning moist or fertile earth, the place where the water meets the land. Known as a goddess of the primal birth waters, and of the attaining of wisdom through knowledge and skill, she is the Mother of the Irish Gods, the Tuatha dé Danann. They are traditionally said to have arrived in Ireland on 1 May, and honoured their father Bel by lighting the first Beltane fires when they burned their ships at dawn.

Later the Druids would re-enact this story by lighting Beltane fires across the land, over which men and women would jump to ensure their fertility. As at Samhain (see page 224) all fires in the household were extinguished, then relit with flames from the sacred Bel fire, bringing

blessings into the home, which benefited from the union of the goddess and god.

In honouring the festival of Beltane, we draw this fresh, virile energy into our lives at a time when, according to Irish myth, the gods arrived in the mortal world, literally infusing physical matter with divinity. At Beltane we can reinvigorate our lives with this divine current. We can also tune in to this time of duality and sacred union to honour our hearts and the romantic and sexual energies in our lives.

Invoking Bel

Try calling Bel into your own life to help you live a more vital, virile life in a myriad of ways. To do this, you might like to light a candle or a fire or greet the sun at dawn, and call to him in your own words. What do you want to say to him? How do you think he should be called? Using your initiative will make your invocation more effective, but you may want to try the following words as a starting point:

> *'Mighty Lord Bel, radiant one! May you shine your light on my heart and upon my life! I call you to me, and honour you this day! Blessed be!'*

Take some deep breaths, focus your intention and feel the power of the spring, the rising green and the summer to come touch your spirit so that you may align yourself to the power of Beltane and bring new life, in whatever way you chose, into being at this time.

Bel, god of the sun

The battle of winter and summer

Beltane, together with the Summer Solstice, is mentioned in many folkloric tales as the time when winter and summer do battle for the hand of the

goddess of the land. This motif can be seen in the tales of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere, and of Robin Hood, Maid Marian and the Sheriff of Nottingham, as well as of Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwythyr ap Greidawl, who do battle each Beltane for the hand of the spring goddess, Creiddylad. These battles are re-enacted in mummers plays and at May Day celebrations across Britain, held like Beltane on 1 May. This popular celebration is a later British and northern European festival and traditionally includes Morris dancing, maypoles and the election of a May queen to oversee the festivities, which commonly now also recognizes workers' rights. Drawing on the Celtic and Gaelic Beltane celebrations, as well as on the Roman festival of Floralia (the festival of flowers on 27 April), the day has a less overt pagan flavour than in the distant past, though there has been a resurgence of large Beltane events in recent years, such as the yearly Edinburgh Beltane Fire Festival that captures much of the festival's ancient spirit in its style and atmosphere.

The flower maiden – goddess of sovereignty

The goddess at Beltane goes by many names. She is the flower maiden Blodeuwedd (see also page 55); she is Creiddylad, Rhiannon, Guinevere, Maid Marian and many others. Often she comes from faery to the mortal world, to be fought over by the Oak King (see page 129) and the Holly King (see page 264), or a pair of young and old suitors, conferring sacred kingship for a time upon the winner of her hand. Often the form of the White Mare represents this goddess of the land, and images of white horses are found carved into the chalk hillsides of much of Britain, most notably the White Horse at Uffington in Oxfordshire. She is also sometimes known as a beautiful cow, especially in Irish legends, where she is associated with Boann and Queen Maeve due to her notable sexual appetites and her connection with cattle – Beltane falling within the astrological sign of Taurus, the bull. At this time she quickens life in all she touches, and births all living things upon her mantle. A goddess of blossom and nectar, she is the primal and sacred source of all fertility. Without her, all becomes barren as she retreats to the underworld in the winter months, but her return at Beltane restores the fecundity of the earth itself. These goddesses are fought over by the dual kings or forces of the land, by winter and summer, life and

death, or have interchangeable lovers, but the goddess, the sovereignty and soul of the land herself, remains constant throughout.

The May queen and the maypole

Electing a May queen from among the local girls or young women has been a popular part of May Day festivities for hundreds of years. A personification of the flower goddess, the May queen is also, in the Catholic religion, seen as a representation of the Virgin Mary. The May queen leads the May Day procession and initiates the dancing and other festivities, such as dancing around the maypole. A phallic symbol representing the male aspect of fertility as well as an axis mundi, a hub around which the world spins, the maypole harks back to the sacred trees of the pagan days, known in the Irish as bilé trees (see page 87).

Invoking the May queen

At Beltane the goddess can help with all aspects of fertility, love and beauty, as well as with any issues concerning personal sovereignty and power. You may like to call upon her as the May queen, or as a more specific goddess, such as Creiddylad, for whom the gods Gwyn and Gwythr do battle each Beltane, or as any other goddess that appeals to you. Traditionally these goddesses would be invoked at dawn, out in nature, but they can hear you wherever and however you call. Try this invocation to Creiddylad to get you started, but you could call any f lower or fertility goddess you choose in this way, changing the words to suit your needs and hopes.

Go out barefoot into your garden at dawn, and sprinkle a circle of rose petals around you on the grass. Feel the dew on your feet, and look up into the blue sky and around at the flowers and plants springing into life. Take three deep breaths and say:

> *'Queen of the May, great lady of the flowers, Creiddylad I call to you. Bring me your blessings and your beauty. Guide my heart to a safe harbour. Bring me love, great goddess, this Beltane. Blessed be!'*

Finish by spending some time in meditation on the grass, watching the first minutes of the day unfold, noticing the beauty of the spring all around and allowing a quiet space to feel the goddess's guidance.

Calling on the divine aspects within

Beltane is the prime time to rediscover your goddess or god within, and reinvigorate the divinity inside you. Woo your inner lover with self-care and nurture, but also discover or encourage your inner hero or your wild side, as well as your innate wisdom. In the Celtic traditions, goddesses associated with Beltane are wild and alluring, huntresses and flower maidens. The wizard Gwydion magically brought Blodeuwedd into incarnation as a bride for his nephew, yet she spurned her husband's love in favour of her lover Gronw for which she was turned into an owl. This shows the dual nature of the Beltane goddesses – although beautiful, they are also spirits of the wild, of nature untamed. They are the sovereignty of the land herself, over which numerous male gods or protagonists do battle in a ritualized cycle mirroring the seasons themselves.

Gods connected to the traditions of Beltane include the sun god, Bel, as well as wilder figures, such as the Green Man (see page 263) or Jack-in-the-Green, and semi-divine heroes such as Robin Hood. Another male protagonist connected to Beltane is the wild man, sometimes known as the Woodwose – a great, hairy, sometimes antlered giant representing the spirits of nature and wild animals (see page 94).

At Beltane, the sun god, or the god of the green wood, is rising in power, virility and energy and so can you, if you align yourself with this divine aspect within. Remember the importance of deep roots, and of drawing in strength from the earth, as well as of reaching high and absorbing the sun's light and bright influence. Take the time to ask yourself what makes you feel really alive. What gives you a sense of physical wellbeing and spiritual vitality? What in your life makes you feel proud? What gives you a sense of adventure?

Deep inside you know how and this is the time to enact those ideas. Stand up for yourself and your dreams. Do not allow yourself to be tamed by circumstances, but let your creativity and determination help you find a life that feels authentic and reflects your nature. Seek out ways to become prouder of yourself and, if necessary, adjust your self-image and even your

appearance to take your accomplishments and positive attributes into consideration, so that you can act from a position of self worth and confidence.

The Woodwose

The Woodwose or Wodwose is a traditional English figure representing the wild man of the forest in a similar way to the Green Man (see page 263). Derived from the Old English *wudu* (wood/forest) and *wasa* (being), the Woodwose is featured in the 14th-century tale *Gawain and the Green Knight*. As part of the May Day celebrations, it is traditional in some areas to make a Woodwose costume out of wickerwork, cloth and green leaves, which can be worn by a man or a sequence of men throughout the festivities, as they run and cavort through the crowds, blessing all who come near, and bringing the spirit of faery and otherworldly wildness into the town.

Heart chakra meditation: Expand your heart energy

Beltane is all about getting in touch with the love in your life. This exercise can help you expand and heal your heart, helping you to access a more loving, heart-centred life.

Sitting comfortably with eyes closed, take three deep calming breaths. With each breath feel your tension and attention to the day's events slip away and gently turn your focus within. Feel the earth beneath you, supportive and nurturing, and the heavens above you, inspiring and expansive.

Now, with another three breaths, feel the energy from the earth filling your body. Place your attention above, and for another three breaths feel the energy from the heavens descend and also fill your body, mingling with the earth at your heart centre. See this as a gently turning sphere of golden light, gently filling your chest, glowing and warm.

Here in this sacred private space, how do you feel? Physically as well as emotionally? What does your heart say to you? Just allow this private heart space to fill your awareness for a while. See in your mind's eye the glowing

sphere shape itself into a beautiful flower, filling you with more love, and more awareness of this love with every gently opening petal. You can change this imagery to green oak leaves if you prefer. Feel into this, sitting with the beauty of your heart for a while, before opening your eyes and gently taking your awareness back to the everyday world.

The magical May tree

Beltane was traditionally held at the first full moon after the flowering of the hawthorn (*crataegus monogyna*), also known as the May tree. The hawthorn is sacred to the goddess as maiden, mother and crone. The blossom is her maiden aspect; the berries, the mother; and she is protected by the thorns of the crone, ensuring only those worthy of her love may enter beneath her sacred boughs to achieve fruitfulness. Hawthorns are faerie trees, and tradition holds that only faerie friends may safely cut its wood, and only ever with permission. Hawthorn is also associated with the heart (it is a useful herbal medicine for heart complaints) and this is a clue to its ancient magic: to befriend the hawthorn you must learn the wisdom of the heart, and thereby attain inner sovereignty. Only a king can wed the queen of the May, by learning this mystery and proving his worth.

In Wales it is traditional to decorate the outside of the house with hawthorn at Beltane to call in the blessings of the season, but hawthorn should never be brought inside. This is bad luck, as the faery revels it encourages may wreak havoc throughout the house and home.

Paying honour to the sacred hawthorn

Hawthorns are easily identified due to their craggy bark, small multi-lobed leaves and the pink or white blossoms they bear at this time. Beltane is a good time to visit a hawthorn with an offering of fresh or bottled spring water, or, more traditionally, to make a wish and tie a ribbon or cloth, known as a clootie, to one of its branches. Traditionally, only hawthorns next to holy wells or springs were used in this way, and the cloth was first dipped into the water and then used to soothe a person’s forehead or other body part to cure them of injury, illness, bad luck or distress. The cloth was then hung on the tree to take away the problem in exchange for blessings and protection.

If you choose to tie a clootie onto a hawthorn or other tree, be sure to use biodegradable cloth and, after a month, return and untie it, so that you do no harm. Use your own words for your wish or prayer. This ritual is best practised with trees in your own garden or land, rather than ones in public areas where you may encourage others to follow your example with less responsibility. It is important that we honour and continue our traditions, but in the modern era we also need to take a greater environmental perspective into consideration and allow this to inform our practices where relevant.

A Beltane love spell

This spell will bless and strengthen an existing relationship or draw a new one to you. Take a bowl of fresh or bottled spring water, and a candle coloured green or pink – the colours of Venus, the planet of love. Using a knife, inscribe a heart onto the candle, or the name of your lover. What do you want to bring to you? Focus your intention, asking in your own words that love come your way, or that your existing love be strengthened. Then, when you are ready, light the candle with a fresh match and say:

> *'I light this candle that the spirits of Beltane bless me. May I know love. May I be loved. May I be loving in return. May the wisdom of the heart guide me. Great goddess and god, bless the love in my life!'*

Let the candle burn down safely. As the candle burns so the magic ripples out across the worlds, to come back to you manifested when its work is done. Blessed be!

Holy wells

Natural springs and holy wells were revered as deeply sacred places in the Celtic tradition, and have been honoured as far back as Neolithic times. These were places belonging to the spirits and most commonly to feminine goddesses, thought of as life giving as well as dangerous and to be feared. Celtic nemetons, or sacred groves, were often sited at wells and springs, and

received all manner of offerings, from the heads of heroes and enemies to precious swords and votive statues. In later Celtic traditions, these places received offerings of flowers and coins, becoming the wishing wells we know of today.

The tradition of making offerings of flowers to holy wells has continued through the times of Celtic Christianity, during which the goddesses were usually demoted into saints, right through to the present day. This custom is known as ‘well dressing’ and can be an extravagant affair. In the Peak District villages of Derbyshire, as well as other rural parts of Britain, well dressing involves making a picture of the local goddess, now mostly thought of as Britannia, the over-arching spirit of the land, out of flowers pressed into damp clay to keep them fresh. Symbolic items relating to fertility and goddess lore, such as seashells and pine cones, are also added, as well as prayers or national slogans. These again invoke the goddess of the land, albeit subconsciously for some, though the pagan threads of this practice are becoming more obvious again in our era. The offering is often then paraded through the town and placed with great pageantry by the waters, with many onlookers and May Day pilgrims in attendance.

The ’Obby ’Oss

The ’Obby ’Oss or Hobby Horse is another ancient figure associated with Beltane. He takes part in May Day festivals across the southwest UK, most famously at Padstow in Cornwall, where a special song rings out across the town as he dances through the streets to the pounding rhythm of the drums. ’Obby ’Osses can also be seen at Barnstaple and Combe Martin in Devon and Minehead in Somerset, and are now being reawakened in other parts of the country.

A strange figure, the ’Obby ’Oss doesn’t look like a horse, but instead has the appearance of a large black witch’s hat, skirted with black cloth, with a stylized horse face attached. The men of the town take turns carrying this wicker form, embodying the ’Oss, the spirit of wild fertility, which bucks and spins around the town, sometimes chasing the women and teenage girls. Once the ’Obby ’Oss used to mark all he

touched with a thin layer of soot for the day, and it was said that this conferred fertility and would ensure any women so distinguished would become pregnant. The costume's strange shape is intended to be a disguise – the pointed head perhaps hiding the horn of a unicorn', an ancient magical creature of sexual potency and the friend of all maidens. You might like to try a Beltane pilgrimage to one of the villages where he is still honoured to catch a glimpse for yourself, and partake of his wild revelry, or make one to use yourself and revive his magic in your own home town.

The ’Obby ’Oss

Honouring the gift of water

This Beltane, try seeking out a well, spring or river near you, and see if you can learn some of its history, its old names and traditions. The local library can help with this. Prepare a gift of flowers for the ancient spirit of this body of water, so important to those who lived on the land before us. Also, consider the uses and essential nature of water, precious for all yet scarce for so many on earth: in what ways can you honour it? You might, for example, want to make a commitment to use eco-friendly cleaning products or give a gift to a water charity. In this way we can use Beltane as a way of expanding our hearts to become more environmentally aware, as well as honouring water as the element most associated with our emotions and deepest feelings.

When you visit your local well, spring or river, take some time to just sit by it and feel the atmosphere of the place, as well as allowing some space for your own feelings and the promptings of your heart to surface. By creating an opportunity for some quiet, sacred moments we allow ourselves to get into greater contact with ourselves, as well as reflect in a clearer way upon our relationships – all good activities for a deeper understanding of Beltane and its unique spirit.

A Beltane chant

The Padstow May Day song is very old and very long, and has two versions, one for the night and one for the day. You can listen to different recordings of the tune online if you visit YouTube, but this abridged version works well as a chant to used as part of your own Beltane celebrations and practice. Try singing it under the full moon or around a Beltane fire to draw in the old magic of the season:

'Unite, unite, let us all unite
For the summer is a coming today
And wither we are going, we all will unite
In the merry morning of May.'

Celtic starlore at Beltane

Beltane sees the change of the seasons become visible in earnest even in the night sky. In the northern hemisphere, as the evenings progress, the very top of Orion the Hunter can still be seen, as can his faithful hound Sirius, in the southwest. To the west of this, above Orion, is the constellation of Cancer, the crab – this grouping of five stars is rather like a downward facing Y and its three 'legs' point south, southwest and north.

Low in the southeast horizon during the spring evenings of April and May is the brilliant jewel Spica, its name meaning 'ear of wheat'. This star is part of the constellation of Virgo, the maiden goddess who comes into greater importance at this time of the year as she is ritually wed to make the world fertile once again. Holding the ear of wheat, she carries the abundance of crops to come, and has the ability to provide for her people, and the seeds of the future. While she provides for all, she is also virgin – inviolate and sovereign in herself. Once the word virgin did not mean without sexual experience, rather an unattached free woman, and here we see Virgo bringing in the greening of the year via her own productive power, the equal of her lover in both power and desire. As such she can be understood in the Celtic tradition as Danu, goddess of fertility and fecundity and the mother of the gods (see page 87).

Another figure in Celtic myth that fulfils this role is Queen Maeve of Ireland. She is associated with great sexual appetite and with cattle, and so also with Beltane, which occurs during the sign of Taurus, the bull (see page 91).

Below Virgo are the smaller constellations of Corvus the Crow and Crater the Cup. The Crow is of great importance in Celtic tradition as a messenger of the gods, and a reminder of fate and sacred lore. The Cup (or cauldron) is a sacred vessel of female power and the regeneration of the soul – the grail of later Arthurian myth.

Beltane stellar meditation: Honouring the fertility to come

This meditation explores the constellation Virgo, the maiden goddess, to align with her great fertility and vigour and her lovers, the dark and light parts of the year itself. She holds all the potential for the year ahead in her womb and her passionate sexuality will bring the crops to fruition across the land. As the wheel turns and her lover the lord of summer comes into ascendency, her great kundalini (life force) will bring us renewed energy

and enthusiasm as well as increasing our ability to create and bring new life and blessings into our lives.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes gently relax behind your closed lids, and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are walking along a path of pale stone, winding around a vast hill. Above the night sky glitters with stars, and your footsteps are soft upon the soil. The air is still.

As you ascend the hill you see that across the land from horizon to horizon a vast network of lakes surrounds you, reflecting the light of the stars in their still waters. You climb steadily, and as you ascend a vast crowd of beings meet you, some of them seem human but others are part animal or part tree. Birds swoop overhead and rabbits and deer sit side by side in the grass, but all are silent.

At the top of the hill an amazing sight greets you: the night sky is so huge that it takes up almost all that you can see, the land below a smooth dark mirror reflecting its light. Above you, enthroned in glittering stars as white as blinding snow, sits a woman. She is impossibly tall, her head crowned with stars that glimmer in her long silver hair. Her gown is made of the deepest blue and black of space, studded with constellations like diamonds. In her hands she holds a sheaf of wheat made of spun golden light, and as you stare up into her face you see her eyes are like vast blue sapphires that remind you of the deepest seas.

At once you are overcome with wonder, and lower your head from her blinding radiance. And then you notice that on either side of her are two figures dressed like ancient warriors, one wears red and gold, and the other black and white. They hold long swords and do battle at her feet in graceful, light-footed movements, in a ritualized dance. You see that these two beings are evenly matched, neither one stronger than the other. They spin and turn and the heavens reel overhead, turning the seasons, until with one great arc of his sword the warrior in red and gold suddenly slays his companion, and a great cheer goes up from all around the hill. The warrior in black and white falls to the ground, but he will rise again when the seasons turn to winter.

In the meantime, the red warrior bows at the lady's feet, and all the hill is full of cheer and shouting, and the beating of drums and the sound of flutes fill the air. The lady smiles, bowing her head and raising her hand in blessing upon all those called here, at this sacred time. Immediately you feel a wave of energy, of life, rush out across the land, and you tremble in its wake. It feels as if shivering fire is running up your spine, and you feel a sudden lightness and excitement tingle in your skin, in your very bones. The red warrior now wears a golden crown, and the air grows warm and shimmers with heat all around him, and all those gathered here hail him as the king of summer.

Take a while to breathe in the scene, and muse upon what you have seen and felt. The ancient symbolism of this sacred drama speaks not to the mind but to the spirit, aligning your soul's journey with the rhythm of the land and the ancestors.

After a while you sense that it is time to return to the everyday world. Give thanks in your heart for what you have experienced, and return the way you came, down the hill. With every footstep upon the path you descend to the everyday world once more, until your footsteps shift from the soil and earth to stillness, and your breath settles in your chest where you sit. Feel yourself back in your body, easily and gently.

Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always, before wriggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes as you return to the everyday world. You may need to ground yourself carefully after this exercise by eating and drinking and taking your time to feel yourself back in your body.

Garden magic at Beltane

April and May are busy months in the garden. Now is the time to sow herb seeds, such as dill, coriander (cilantro), chives, mustard, parsley and borage. Borage (*borago officianalis*) is a wonderful garden plant with beautiful deep blue, star-shaped flowers that are great in salads and make a good herbal tea for nerves and anxiety or for combating adrenal fatigue. It can also be taken as starflower oil capsules, as borage is very high in gamma linolenic acid, and can be used to ease arthritis.

Comfrey (*symphytum officianale*), another important wisewoman plant, will be putting on new growth now. The leaves can be steeped and infused in oil to make an excellent remedy for bruises, sprains and even aid healing of broken bones (its folk name is 'knitbone').

To make your own comfrey oil just gather and finely chop your comfrey leaves or buy some dried and put them in a sterile clear glass jar. Add enough vegetable or olive oil to cover the leaves and fill to the top so there is no air in the jar when the lid is screwed on and store on a sunny windowsill for about a month. Strained and stored in a dark glass bottle somewhere cool, this should last for a year.

Comfrey can also be used to make an excellent organic mulch or feed for your garden. To make comfrey 'tea' plant food, place as many leaves as you can in a bucket and pour in some rain or tap water until the leaves are fully covered. Cover and leave somewhere well away from the house for a month or so (the smell is not pleasant) before adding a cup of the brew to a watering can's worth or so of water.

Sow a mini meadow

May is also an excellent time to sow a wildflower meadow, which no matter how small can help protect endangered species of plants, as well as the animal wildlife that it supports. Meadows prefer nutrient-poor soil, which needs to be thoroughly weeded if you are beginning from scratch with a wildflower seed mix. Alternatively, you can use pots filled with used (not fresh) compost and sprinkle wildflower seed on the surface. Other than a little water, these plants need little or no attention to blossom beautifully in the summer. Try this little chant as you sow or tend to them to help them bloom and to tune in to the spirits of the flowers.

> *'Wild spirits, wildflowers, grow and grow, grow and grow.*
> *Bring beauty here, bring life here, grow and grow, grow and grow.'*

Beltane crafts

Beltane is a time of wild, greening energy, alive with nature's sensual eroticism. Have fun using your creativity to express the beauty of this season, by making flower garlands for your hair or crafting antlers to honour the festival's fertile faerie magic.

The maypole

Symbolic of the World Tree and a focal point for the fertile magic of May, a maypole takes some time to prepare. The upright pole is usually constructed from a tree trunk, which needs to be straight, tall enough, (say 5m/16ft), with the branches trimmed away. Next, the pole needs to be 'planted' deep enough to be stable, perhaps 2m (6½ft) below the ground. This is a group effort and safety must come first.

You then need an equal number of ribbons, around 1.5 times the height of the pole, in two contrasting colours, usually red and white (a sacred faery combination, signifying the male and female, the red and white dragons and much else – see page 27). These are attached to a wreath at the top of the pole, suspended by two lengths or wire or cord. These ribbons will be held by the dancers who spiral around the maypole, weaving back and forth, mirroring the turn of the seasons and the dance between the goddess and god.

Alternatively, a small maypole for children can be made using a thin plastic or wooden pole, secured in the ground, with an eye bolt or a hook for the ribbons. A table-top version can be made with a stick planted in a pot of soil or stones, decorated with ribbons and flowers.

Flower and leaf circlets

These look beautiful and evoke the wild magic of the season as well as the king and queen of the May.

You will need

- *Long, whippy lengths of ivy*
- *Leafy, thin branches of oak (or another tree)*

- *Long-stemmed flowers or climbing flowers (e.g. clematis, roses, honeysuckle)*
- *Florist's wire*
- *Ribbon*
- *Hair clips*

Measure the ivy around your head for a comfortable fit before tying it into a circlet with florist's wire or ribbon.

Now you have your base, you can start weaving in the flowers around it. Tie each flower firmly to the circlet of ivy with florist's wire.

Keep weaving in flowers until you achieve the desired effect, then secure on your head using hair clips.

Alternatively, crowns of oak or other leaves can be made using thin branches, again secured with florist's wire, with more leaves woven in. Use a strong-stemmed plant as your base and the rest is easier than it sounds. You can also weave leaves and/or flowers around a wire base, twisting the wire around the flowers and foliage to hold it all together.

Flower crown

Antlers

Some people like to wear antlers during their Beltane celebrations, to align with the virile fertility of the stag, sacred to the untamed sexual spirit of this time. This can be done in many ways, including using a whole deer skull or threading the antlers through a safety helmet covered with deerskin to help the wearer support the weight. Red deer antlers are the largest and are very impressive but the smaller antlers of the muntjac or roe deer are often cheaper to acquire, as well as easier to use and wear, and still look lovely.

Alternatively, antlers can be made of suitable branches or sticks. These look great attached to a hat, often inserted through slits in the cloth.

A Beltane altar

Bring the blessings of spring and early summer into your home by creating a collection of seasonal objects – spring flowers, seashells, crystals and other beautiful natural things, in honour of the goddess of the green world. Suitable colours are green to honour nature and the faeries, or red and white, to represent respectively the feminine and the masculine, the goddess and the god. Two candles of red and white, for example, can be lit in a prominent position to honour the sacred union of the god and goddesses at this time.

Kitchen witchery at Beltane

Beltane is a perfect time to create sensual fresh feasts and indulge in the delicious tastes of early summer. The land is now lush and green and the earth's abundance is now really emerging. Revel outside with picnics, garden parties and romantic outdoor suppers, and infuse your cooking with local produce, foraged treats and a little wild magic.

Lovers' cup

You will need

- *750ml/26fl oz/3 cups red wine*
- *1 tsp cloves*
- *1 tsp ground cinnamon*
- *50g/1¾oz/¼ cup brown sugar (or to taste)*
- *A handful of fresh or dried rose petals*

Put the red wine, cloves and cinnamon in a large pan on a low heat and bring to a gentle simmer. Add the brown sugar to the wine and spices in the pan, and stir well until dissolved. Add more sugar if you prefer a sweeter taste and less if you prefer a tarter flavour.

Sprinkle rose petals to bring love to the potion, stirring deiseil (clockwise) with a wand, or a wooden or silver spoon. Ask the goddess to bless the wine with her loving energy. You could call upon any goddess you chose, but perhaps try this to get you started.

'Creidyladd, queen of the May, bring your blessings here, to you I pray, make this a potion of love and desire, of fertility and hearts afire.'

You might also like to leave a cup of wine on your seasonal altar as a gift to the goddess, perhaps as part of a Beltane feast or during a handfasting (pagan wedding).

Rose syrup

Good with ice cream, and poured over fruit salads, this delicious syrup evokes the goddess of the May and is infused with the powerful magic of the rose, attracting love and faerie blessings.

You will need

- *350g/12oz/4 cups fresh rose petals*
- *480ml/16fl oz/2 cups water*
- *450g/1lb/2¼ cups sugar*
- *1 stick cinnamon or star anise (optional)*

Place all the ingredients in a large pan on a low heat and bring to a gentle simmer for 60 minutes.

Pass the syrup through a fine-mesh sieve before decanting into sterilized bottles (if you are intending to keep it) or use fresh, stored in the fridge.

The colour of the syrup will vary depending upon the natural variations of the petals, and the quantity will vary depending on how much of the water has evaporated.

Mai bowle

Mai bowle is a traditional punch that is popular in German May Day celebrations and uses the wild herb sweet woodruff (*galium oderatum*), also known as 'wild baby's breath' and 'master of the woods'. This beautiful

herb shouldn't be taken in larger quantities without the guidance of a qualified herbalist, but is perfectly safe in the amount suggested here.

Traditionally, woodruff was used with other herbs to invoke visions and to arouse men's desires. It was sacred to the season and used in various forms of Beltane magic, honouring the gods of the forest such as Jack-in-the-Green and Cernunnos (see page 229), as well as the faerie folk.

You will need

- *1 handful woodruff (wild baby's breath), plus extra to serve*
- *240ml/8fl oz/1 cup water*
- *960ml/32fl oz/4 cups Champagne or sparkling wine*
- *480ml/16fl oz/2 cups white wine*
- *200g/7oz/2 cups fresh strawberries, chopped or whole*

Place the woodruff in a large bowl, reserving a few sprigs for serving, and pour over the water before leaving to soak for 2 hours.

Strain the water through a fine-mesh sieve, preserving the water and discarding the flowers.

Then, in a large bowl, combine the water, Champagne (or sparkling wine) and the white wine, before adding the strawberries.

Cover and place in the fridge for 1 hour to chill. Sprinkle with a few sprigs of fresh woodruff before serving.

The fires of Calan Mai

In Wales, Beltane or May Day is called Calan Mai or Calan Haf ('the calend or first day of May', 'the calend of summer'). Traditionally, celebrations began the evening before with a big bonfire. In Wales and elsewhere, these fires were usually lit with great intent and ceremony, using what is sometimes known as 'wildfire' or 'need fire', made by rubbing wood against wood in order to rid the community and cattle of disease and bad luck. The need fire was so magical that there were many special rules about how it should be made, one common one being that all other fires must be extinguished before it is lit. In Wales, the need fire was sometimes

lit using two sticks of oak, but the fire itself was often said to need nine sacred woods, placed crosswise in a circular fire pit. A Scottish account suggests the need fire must be lit by rubbing wood against a turning spindle wheel, while others describe how a vertical pole was placed in the earth and a horizontal pole turned around it to create the flame, this symbolism being reminiscent of the Celtic Jupiter columns (see page 87) and the maypole (see page 106).

Sometimes a sheep or a cow was roasted on the flames of the Beltane fire, again to banish disease from the livestock. In Ireland twin fires were lit and the cattle driven between them for the same reason.

Lighting a Beltane fire

Lighting a Beltane fire can help to clear your energy, as well as draw in the blessings and virility of the season. You might choose to jump the fire (see page 115), which is a potent blessing, or use the fire to burn a list of your sorrows and 'dis-ease' or regrets, as well as any wishes to grant you a fresh start, such as prayers for health, a lover or a child, or for anything you wish to grow with love.

Spirit nights

Beltane is one of three spirit nights of the year, the others being the Summer Solstice and Samhain, when the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest. At Beltane, the goddess and the god, sometimes known in folklore as the faery king and queen, are wed, bringing life to the land. Now is the time to look out for faeries and other spirits, who travel this night on the quarterly migrations and to celebrate the greening of nature. Leave a gift of cream on the doorstep for them as an offering as they pass by, to honour their kinship and seek their blessing. Traditionally, at this time you may sleep beneath an elder tree for a vision of the faeries – but beware, you may cross over with them, never to return, unless you carry a piece of iron in your pocket.

A Beltane visualization

In this guided journey you can connect deeper with the mysterious teachings of the season by witnessing the union of the goddess and the Green Man, as the lord of summer bringing fertility to the land.

See before you an oak door. This is the first step of your journey to explore the sacred mystery of Beltane. Take a deep breath, open the door and follow a path through the trees. It is early morning, and a light mist still clings to the tree roots, fading as the warm, bright sun filters through the leaves, dappling the ground before you in green and gold.

You see others are joining you, making their way through the trees and on the path ahead of you and behind you. Some are dressed in fine clothes, long brightly coloured robes, while others wear gowns of green leaves and fur. Antlers, flowers and feathers are entwined in their hair, so they appear as tree people, animal people, strange and wild faery people defying description. Some have flickering lights around their heads, while others are clearly mortal folk, dressed in jeans and leather boots. In the distance you hear the sound of high, shrill pipes playing, and the pounding of drums. You begin to walk to their insistent rhythm, your body leading you forward as if along a thread, your heart beginning also to beat in time to the drums.

Through the trees you see more people, walking the same way as you, and you realize they, too, are following paths. Some are singing as they go, 'Unite! Unite! Let us all unite! For summer has come today!' They repeat the words over and over like a mantra, and you find yourself repeating their words under your breath, gradually louder and clearer as you go. Ahead you see a great gathering of people, as well as animals of every kind – stags and deer, bears, wild cats, badgers and foxes, even wolves – all lying around peacefully or weaving through the crowd. Children laugh and run around, some riding the animals fearlessly. There are also owls, ravens, herons, hawks, eagles, as well as the smaller birds, the sparrows, the wrens – the trees are crowded with every type of bird, sitting among ribbons and bells tied to the branches. The air is full of celebration, laughter, delight and, through it all, the chanting, 'Unite! Unite! Let us all unite! For summer has come today!'

You make your way through the crowd, and as it parts to your right and left, a great hush descends upon the forest. To your right walks a man, tall and broad, in a green cloak with serpents twined around his bare arms. He wears

a crown of oak leaves and is surrounded by an entourage of warriors clad in leather and cloth dyed blue with woad. With them come stags and hunting dogs, creatures and men of the forest and mysterious, cloaked wisemen.

To your left, surrounded by a great company of spirits, faeries and f lower folk scattering petals in her wake, walks a tall woman, beautiful beyond imagining, her features shifting and settling in gentle waves like a soft breeze across a meadow. She wears a green gown and there are stars in her hair, and f lowers spring from her footsteps. As these two deities draw closer, approaching one another from east and west, the air tingles with their power and sanctity.

Here in this forest glade, you have come to witness the holiest of things, the sacred union that makes the land anew. The goddess and the Green Man reach out to one another as equals, and dragons spiral around their wrists, twisting and merging and bringing them together as one. As these two figures embrace a great roar of rejoicing breaks out across the land:

> *'Summer is come! The land is fertile! There shall be new life!*
> *Unite! Unite! Let us all unite! For summer has come today!'*

The music and the drumming start up again and the crowd surges around in a dance that picks you up and takes you with it, away from the goddess and the Green Man, through the trees. All around the morning is bright and blossoms burst forth on every bough so all the forest is covered with flowers and rings with voices, laughter and delight. You feel your spirits lift and tingle with new life, ideas and ways of being. A unity within yourself grows and blossoms, you know and love yourself a little deeper than before. You know and love the world more also … delight fills your heart and spills over, and you find yourself laughing, singing and dancing through the trees with the crowds. Be with this for a while, and let yourself feel your freedom, and your joy, your unity with creation.

In time, you will see the path once more. You know it is time to return home, to your body and the present time. Retrace your steps along the path and back through the oak door. Take your time. Feel yourself back in the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving about.

Remember to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

A loving Beltane ceremony

Spring is turning to summer, so now is the time to go camping or even sleep under the stars, perhaps lighting a Beltane fire to jump over when the dawn comes.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Head off to the woods for a celebratory family or community picnic. Visit a bluebell wood if you are lucky enough to have one near you; at this time of year it will be a fantastic spectacle, the forest floor carpeted with these beautiful blue flowers, which are sacred to the faeries. Alternatively, the local park can be a great place for a group celebration. Get together with other members of your community and reinitiate May Day celebrations with a May king and queen, traditional dances and perhaps even a maypole (see page 106). You could draw on the practices that once took place in the area where you live, or even on your own ancestral traditions.

Dancing around the maypole

Encourage everyone to wear flowers, and those who can sing or play instruments to join together and make music. Get the children to dress up in their finest clothes and look out for faeries and pixies in the trees. Perhaps

the elders will tell tales of when they fell in love or danced all night, and talk about how they have kept their loving relationships strong over time.

Celebrating alone

In the days leading up to Beltane you might wish to try an all-night vigil under an elder tree to catch a glimpse of the faeries and the spirits of the land, or make a pilgrimage somewhere sacred and full of magic, a romantic destination that you have always wanted to visit. Allow yourself time to relate to yourself and your spiritual path, your inner sovereignty and divinity. Treat yourself as special.

You might also like to prepare for your Beltane ceremony by gathering greenery and flowers and decorating your space with flowers, green branches and leaves, as well as candles.

When it is time to begin, create a sacred space by calling in the four directions (see page 14). You may also wish to invoke your ancestors, and the goddess and the Green Man, or Bel and Danu, and ask for their blessings, to bring new life and fertility into your life, on any level, or to improve your image of yourself. Invoke them using your own words, or try these:

> *'Lady of the green wood, great goddess, lord of the sun, Jack-in-the-Green, I call to you this Beltane, to ask for your blessings and guidance ... bring us love and life! Blessed be!'*

After this would be a good point to perform the Beltane stellar meditation (see page 102), as well as any spells or prayers, such as the Beltane love spell (see page 96). You may like to chant the Padstow May Day song (see page 100) and light a Beltane fire (see page 115). Jumping it for blessings and purification can be exciting and great fun, but only do it when the fire is small and low. Safety first!

Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that

have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Beltane

The first Beltane celebrations of wild abandon were very different from the sedate May Day fairs of the last few centuries. Now we see a return to a wilder Beltane in many large public celebrations. When we organize Beltane events ourselves, we have a chance to make the festival truly relevant to us, now, and to how we feel. The wheel is ever turning so initiate your own traditions, as well as remembering the old ways. Inside we are always young – love knows no age, no distance, no restrictions and the heart is our wisest teacher.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER FOUR
SUMMER SOLSTICE

SUMMER SOLSTICE – POWER

20–23 June (northern hemisphere)
20–23 December (southern hemisphere)

Summer Solstice is the time of year when the sun reaches its highest point in the sky and the days are at their longest. Those who track, day by day, the different rising and setting points of the sun on the horizon will notice how, on the longest day of the year, the sun appears to pause in its journey across the sky before changing direction. To the prehistoric Celts, dependent on the sun for light and sustenance, this must have seemed hugely significant.

Key Themes

Solstice
the still, pivotal point in the wheel

Celebrating and honouring
strength
illumination
confidence
ability
responsibility
energy
self-acknowledgment
joy
entering maturity
sexuality
marriage

parenthood
faerie revels
merry-making

The word ‘solstice’ means ‘sun stands still’ and the Summer Solstice is both an astronomical moment, when the sun is at its farthest from the celestial equator (in the northern hemisphere it is at its most northerly point), and the longest day of the year. In the northern hemisphere, Summer Solstice takes place on a day between 20–23 June; in the southern hemisphere it falls between 20–23 December.

Now the days are filled with sunshine and life. The fields sway with ripening crops; the hedgerows foam with flowers. As the Summer Solstice approaches, nature’s abundance reminds us that the year is becoming confidently mature, and our lives, if we are lucky, will follow suit. Plans made in the winter and begun in the spring will now be fully underway.

The Druids call the Summer Solstice Alban Hefin, meaning ‘the light of summer’. The Celtic sun gods Bel, Lugh and Ogmios, the goddesses Áine and Gréine, as well as the Oak King (also known as the Green Man) from British folklore are all honoured at this time. Having pushed back the powers of winter and darkness, the sun god is now completely victorious. Yet, paradoxically, in his victory lies the inevitability of his downfall. The days grow shorter from this point, and thoughts of autumn and winter, although still far ahead, begin to stir.

In our own lives, this time represents the challenge of being in our prime, of gaining new strength and enjoying the fruits of our labours, while accepting that these gifts must be surrendered and offered back in due course. But this awareness makes the peak moment even sweeter. And so an important aspect of our Summer Solstice celebrations is to enjoy this time, experiencing it moment by moment, in the knowledge that this abundance and life will ultimately pass. Alban Hefin is a season of celebration and fiery solar energy. Its power is immense, but its glory is short-lived and must be fully embraced when it is here.

Summer Solstice around the world

The Summer Solstice has been a phenomenon of deep spiritual significance since at least Neolithic times and is marked by many monuments across the

globe. These include many of the stone rows and stone circles built in Britain and Ireland by the very earliest farming communities, of which the most famous is Stonehenge. This sacred megalithic site has numerous structures and features aligned toward the Summer Solstice sunrise/Winter Solstice sunset axis, including its processional way from the River Avon.

Greeting the sun

In Egypt, the temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak, the Osireion and the tomb of Osiris at Abydos, as well as the ancient stone circle of Nabta Playa, are also aligned to mark out the Summer Solstice; and in India Cave 26 of the manmade Ajanta cave system is oriented to catch the first rays of the

Summer Solstice sunrise so that they fall upon the face of the Buddha statue placed within. In Ohio, USA, the great Serpent Mound, built by the Adena culture around 1000 BCE, is aligned to the Summer Solstice sunset. These are just a few of the many sites that honour the Summer Solstice around the world.

Litha

A common name for the Summer Solstice is Litha. This probably comes from the Old Saxon Lithi, meaning the 'mildest, most pleasant time of the year', from which derives the Anglo-Saxon names for the months of June and July. The Saxon historian Bede records that these times were called Ærra Lipa and Æfterra Lipa, literally before and after Litha – before and after midsummer.

Spirit nights

Traditionally, the Summer Solstice is one of the three 'spirit nights' of the year (see also pages 112 and 227). Spirits of every kind roam the land at this time, and the faeries ride out from their mounds in merriment and mischief, granting wishes and making prophecies. According to Celtic folklore, many a wanderer or gifted soul may go with the faeries at this time. Some never return, while others eventually come back to the mortal realm with magical gifts and a poetic tongue, their vision of the world changed for ever. These spirit nights encourage imagination and creativity, and so are the perfect time to bring new projects into being. If you wish to meet the spirits of the land at this time, try a silent all-night vigil in the woods, or simply sit beneath the trees at dusk with a glass of elderflower cordial and see who comes along. Becoming a faery friend takes practice, as these elusive beings may be shy and reserved at first.

The Burning Wheel

One ancient motif of the Summer Solstice is the Burning Wheel. Traditionally, this is a bale of hay, a barrel or a wooden cartwheel that is set on fire and rolled down a sacred hill by the local young men. Accompanied

by picnics, games and celebration, such activities were very popular in rural communities all across Europe until fairly recently. The motif of the Burning Wheel may date back thousands of years as a solar metaphor: from here the sun and the year itself do indeed ‘roll downhill’ to the Winter Solstice.

Allow the sun’s energy to illuminate your being by making a point of really appreciating all that is positive and joyful in your life right now. Becoming aware that this time, too, will pass reminds us of the importance of stopping now and then simply to enjoy the good things that we have created in our lives.

The sun goddesses

In Ireland, the Summer Solstice is the time of the faery queen and goddess Áine, who is seen as a beautiful young woman with fiery eyes, though sometimes she is said to take the form of a red mare, running over the hillsides so fast that none can ever catch her. In years gone by, men and women honoured her by parading around the fields twirling bunches of burning hay called cliars to ensure their fertility and attract her blessing.

Solstice beacons

Irish folklore tells of how a young woman met Áine on Knockainey Hill in County Limerick. Áine was enjoying watching the solstice celebrations, but asked if the humans could leave soon so she and her faeries could hold their own celebrations on the hill. Her sister, another Irish goddess of the sun, is Gréine, meaning ‘sun’. She is associated with Cnoc Gréinn, or the hill of Gréine, which is also in Limerick. It is likely that these two hills were once beacon hills and that fires were lit there to mark the Summer Solstice from the earliest times.

Invoking Gréine, the sun goddess

Call upon the goddess of the sun, Gréine, at the Summer Solstice to bring to mind the importance of being present in the moment and to remind you of

the beacons of light in your life. Call for her healing, empowerment and inner radiance as the wheel of the year continues to turn.

Facing the sun, with your eyes closed, relish its light and warmth on your face. Raise your arms and call aloud:

> *'Great goddess Gréine, radiant lady of the sun, I call to you! May your light touch my heart, my mind and my deeds. Illuminate my spirit that I may do your work! Spread your hope and your light all around me and all around the world!'*

Feel the light of the sun filling and warming your heart, healing and rejuvenating every cell in your body. Keeping your eyes closed, see through your eyelids now the light fills your whole aura or energy field, lighting up your inner vision and your mind, illuminating your imagination and refreshing your thinking, breaking down past patterns and revealing new pathways in your consciousness.

Gréine, goddess of the sun

Take your time and lose yourself in the moment. Breathe deeply, thank Gréine and lower your arms.

You may wish to ground yourself by eating and drinking after this exercise.

The Oak King, the Green Man of summer

The Green Man (see page 263) is at the height of his power and prowess during the Summer Solstice, granting fertility to the land. This mysterious figure, a lingering cultural memory of the ancient indigenous gods of vegetation, trees, crops and the wild world, can be found in various forms all around the world, from the Celtic Cernunnos, the Greek Pan and Dionysus and the Roman Silvanus, to the Ngen spirits of the Mapuche people of Chile. The Green Man, embodying the foliage and life force of the earth, calls us back into a relationship with nature once again.

In British folklore, the Green Man is known at this time as the Oak King, in honour of that most majestic and strong of trees, and it is he who oversees the Summer Solstice. Sacred to the Druids, the oak has a history of being revered in Britain and Ireland that goes back thousands of years. It is the great guardian spirit of the land, the oak being synonymous with courage, endurance and the glory of nature. The most sacred and important tree in Druid groves, it was also used in Neolithic times in the mysterious woodhenges – circles of oak posts used for ceremonial purposes. These sites were sometimes coupled with, or later replaced by, circles of stone that honoured the cycles of the sun (see also page 123).

Meditation on the Oak King: Strength in our hearts

You can draw on the vitality of the Oak King for support when facing life's challenges, to guide you toward your life's purpose and to know your own heart's wisdom. If you can, visit a large oak tree in preparation for this exercise; otherwise, look one up online and use it to help fire the image in your mind's eye.

Begin by sitting comfortably and closing your eyes. Take three deep breaths. Feel your feet upon the ground and straighten your back. Then imagine that you are standing at the edge of a great forest. A path of beaten earth lies ahead of you, leading the way through the trees. You step into the forest and see that flowers line your way. Roses and honeysuckle climb upon the trees on either side of you, and the air is thick with their perfume. The only sound is the wind in the branches high above, and the thrum and buzz of bees drinking the nectar of the blooms.

In time you come to a huge oak tree, towering above the forest, its branches reaching impossibly high into a bright blue sky. The very air buzzes with power and your heart beats loudly in your chest. This is a sacred place. As you approach the tree, you look up into the branches and down into the roots. Every part of the tree is full of living beings: lichens and mosses, fungi, small burrowing mammals and insects crawling upon its bark. Up in the branches, birds nest and call in muted voices and butterflies flit and swoop over your head. A deer drinks from a small pool formed from the tree's twisting roots.

Reaching out, you touch the tree gently with your fingertips, and feel the life pulsing within. Slowly you circle the tree until, to your surprise, you come face to face with a tall man, who stands before the trunk, leaning his back into its ridges, sitting among the mighty roots as though it were his throne.

His face is neither young nor old, and he is tall and powerfully built, with nut-brown hair hanging down to his shoulders and sun-drenched skin. Lines on his face show that he has laughed often and smiled more. His green eyes sparkle with humour, and are as deep as the forest itself. A crown of oak leaves circles his brow. This is the Oak King, lord of summer, lord of strength and the wisdom of the heart.

The Oak King loves all those that honour the land, who seek goodness and kindness. He rewards strength and courage, and grants strength to those who need it.

Take a moment now to greet him and honour him in your own way. How do you feel now that you are face to face with this ancient being?

What do you need from the Oak King at this time? What does he ask of you?

The Oak King looks deep into your eyes and reaches out. He touches your brow with his fingertips and places his hand upon your heart, and you know deep in the centre of your being that this is a great gift. He knows your heart and bestows upon you what you truly need at this time to be the best person you can be: to be whole, to be true of heart, to be healed, empowered and complete, as an adult in this world.

In time, your meeting with the Oak King draws to a close. You bow your head in thanks, your heart swelling with gratitude and pride. You have accepted his challenge and passed his test, and you have received his gifts deep in the heart of your being.

You turn around and return along the path of beaten earth, through the forest, through the avenue of trees, back to the everyday world. As you come to the edge of the forest and cross over, you feel yourself back in your body. Wiggle your fingers and toes and feel yourself truly back in the present moment before opening your eyes.

Later on, look back over your meditation with the Oak King. Consider what it means to be a whole and healed adult in this world, at this time.

What are your abilities? Where is your power? How can you wield it to make a better life for yourself and those around you? How can you make a better world?

Such things may feel like huge tasks, insurmountable challenges, but remember the easy confidence of the Oak King, and how the oak tree supports all life around it. You may need to take small, simple steps, but if you keep going, day after day, you can, and will, make a difference. The power is yours to create change in your life and in the world all around. This is your blessing and your responsibility. Use your power wisely.

Celtic starlore at Summer Solstice

At Summer Solstice night is as its shortest and in the northern hemisphere the night sky never becomes truly dark. This extended twilight, together with bright moonlight, may make some of the fainter constellations harder to see. However, high on the horizon to the southeast is the Summer Triangle of Vega, Altair and Deneb, which is easily seen and especially brilliant at this time of year.

Ursa Major, the Great Bear goddess, can be seen in the northwest, the Great Mother presiding over the fruitfulness of the year. Arcturus, the Bear Keeper, is the brightest star in the summer sky in the constellation of Boötes, just south of the zenith. In the northeast, look out for the large W-shape of Cassiopeia, known in the Celtic tradition as Lys Dôn, the court of the Welsh mother goddess Dộn, the equivalent of the Irish Danu. Here is the

stellar seat of the Celtic otherworld, the home of Faerie. Summer Solstice is a high faery day, when they are said to make their migrations to their summer residence, a tradition known as the faery rades, or rides, and it is possible to catch a glimpse of these beings as they travel between the otherworld and the mortal realm. Myths about faeries repeatedly mention how they fell to earth, referring to their stellar origins far back in time.

Summer Solstice stellar meditation: Illumination from the spirits of the stars

This meditation explores the constellation of Cassiopeia and will give you inspiration and vision to help you navigate your life.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes relax gently behind your closed lids, and let your imagination sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, and then expand your awareness to imagine that you are on a small sailboat, crossing a dark, velvet sea.

Be aware of the subtle currents beneath you: the gentle rocking of the boat, as it sails on swiftly, is matched by your breathing, the slow beat of your heart and the pulsing of the blood in your veins. All is darkness above and all is darkness below.

Gradually, on the far horizon, there is a silver glow, which grows as you draw nearer. Ahead of you there is a beautiful land of green hills and a sky of shifting purple hues, streaked with snaking forms, each appearing to be made of starlight. As your sailboat reaches the shoreline, you are met by a host of shimmering beings whose forms shift as they approach you. They tower above you, sometimes seeming to melt into the sky, and at other times appearing to come closer, focusing upon you with large bright eyes. One of them comes forward, and as it does so it seems to stabilize in form, becoming a being neither male nor female as far you can tell, dressed in a simple shift. This will be your ally and guide.

As you step onto the shore, you feel your ally beside you guiding you to a path of pale stone, which gradually ascends away from the sea, cutting through rich, green grass that leads toward a stand of lofty trees. As you

walk toward the trees, they too shift in appearance: at first, they are impossibly tall, with pale grey trunks and dark green leaves. As you get nearer still, they seem to become stone towers, and then turn into trees once more. You are being led through the trees into a city of white and grey stone. It is a strange place, populated by a host of otherworldly beings: some appear human in form, while others are indescribable – beings of shifting light, children with wings and dark staring eyes, women who change from dragons to birds to swirling smoke.

Gradually you draw closer to a huge building that shimmers with a silvery glow. As you approach, this too changes, and becomes two tall trees forming a huge archway. This is the entrance to the stellar temple of the gods. A high choral singing swirls around, together with the subtle sound of chimes and flutes, but you see no musicians. As you enter, you feel surrounded by beings that you cannot see. A wind blows as though a great host is rushing past. Yet you feel an inner stillness here, a great and ancient sanctity, and you know that all these images are your own, that this place is beyond all appearances and forms.

Your guide walks by your side as you progress slowly through this strange place. Ahead of you the light grows stronger, becoming dazzling and forming a woman who towers high above you, her silver hair floating about her like a mantle of stars. You stand by her feet, and she seems to shrink down to look at you. Her bright eyes are full of kindness as she holds out a silver chalice, and she asks you to drink and be refreshed.

You reach out and drink from the chalice of this great goddess, and feel yourself filled with life and wonder. All your burdens and trials seem lighter now, all your worries eased as you catch a glimpse of how you may live with new vision and hope. Your power, your ability to navigate this world according to your highest good, has returned!

Take a moment to be with this great stellar being and give thanks for her gift. When it is time, your guide leads you out the way you came, through the temple and the city, back to the shore where your boat awaits you to carry you home.

The return journey is easier and quicker. Floating gently, upon the very air you breathe, you return to your body once more: eyes closed, your heart

beating slowly and steadily.

Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always. Then, taking your time, wriggle your fingers and toes, and open your eyes as you return to the everyday world again.

You may need to earth yourself carefully after this exercise by eating and drinking. Take your time to feel yourself back into your body and the everyday world.

Herbal magic of vervain

Vervain (*verbena officianalis*) is a powerful magical plant and especially sacred at Summer Solstice. This unassuming wildflower is native to Europe but can be found across the world growing on grass verges and in sunny pastures, as well as being a valuable perennial herb in the garden. It has quite small-toothed, lobed leaves, and its thin spikes develop small, delicate, lilac flowers, each with five petals.

Known as the 'enchanters plant', 'the holy herb' and the 'herb of grace', it is used magically for a whole host of reasons, all to do with bringing in blessings and averting evil influences. It is commonly used to decorate an altar, to make into a tea that can either be drunk (see page 136) or used to consecrate a sacred space, or to ritually cleanse objects or people, especially the ill or vulnerable. Sprigs of vervain can also be used to sprinkle fresh spring water around the home for blessing, as well as for divination and prophecy. It is sometimes placed inside bags of Tarot cards to make them more powerful and accurate, and is a common ingredient in love and protection spells.

In the Celtic lands at the Summer Solstice, vervain is still gathered by Druids, when Sirius, the Dog Star, is rising. They cut it with a sickle or knife, using the left hand, and offer honey to the earth in recompense for taking this especially sacred plant. The sprigs of vervain are then raised up and shown to the star, again using the left hand, in order to be imbued with the star's energy.

Vervain is sacred to Isis, Venus, Aphrodite and, especially, the Welsh goddess Cerridwen, in whose sacred cauldron of inspiration the herb was an ingredient, together with sea foam, rowanberries, lesser celandine and flixweed. Carry vervain in a pouch in your pocket for protection or luck in

love, and burn some as an incense to attract wealth or to overcome money worries.

Vervain tisane

Vervain is a useful plant in herbal medicine, and vervain tisane or tea can be taken as a nerve tonic and to ease insomnia. A mild diuretic, vervain stimulates the liver and can help with bladder and gallbladder problems, as well as ease painful menstruation. To make a vervain tisane, use 1 teaspoon of the dried herb per cup of hot water. Steep for 5 minutes.

St John's wort

Midsummer is also the time of the Christian feast of St John the Baptist, which is observed widely across Europe and was a popular celebration in Britain as it replaced earlier pagan festivals. Around this date, the plant St John's wort (*hypericum perforatum*) is in flower, its bright, sun-yellow blooms like tiny golden stars. St John's wort is a very powerful plant, both medicinally and magically, and when gathered during the Summer Solstice, or on St John's day on 24 June, it is said to be filled with the power of the solstice sun.

St John's wort is commonly used today to treat depression, and is a useful sedative, nervine and diuretic with some antibacterial qualities. Magically, St John's wort is highly protective, and was used by British cunning men and wisewomen in the Middle Ages to shield themselves from evil spirits. St John's wort is said to have been carried by the Celtic missionary St Columba, originally known in Ireland as Colm Cille – in honour of John the Baptist – but the history of the plant's magical and sacred uses goes back much further than Christianity. It has, for example, been used for thousands of years to guard against fire and as a gift to honour the gods of the sun, and was a regular feature upon the household altars of the ancient Greeks for its protective qualities.

Charm for gathering St John's wort

A common magical use for St John's wort was to gather it and keep it under your armpit for good luck. The following ancient charm from the Hebrides, collected by Scottish folklorist Alexander Carmichael in *The Carmina Gadelica*, can be used when picking the plant:

> *'Plantlet of Columba without seeking without searching.*
> *Plantlet of Columba, under my arm forever!*
> *For luck of men.*
> *For luck of means.*
> *For luck of wish.*
> *For luck of produce and kine.*
> *For luck of progeny and people.*
> *For luck of battle and victory.*
> *On land, on ocean through the three on high.*
> *I cull thee now. I cull thee now!'*

St John's wort spell for luck in love

A traditional Celtic charm was practised regularly at the Summer Solstice to determine if a man or woman would be lucky in love and find a partner for marriage during the coming year. To use this charm yourself, pick a sprig of St John's wort on Midsummer's Eve and whisper to it your wish to learn if you will find love soon. Then place the sprig under your pillow. If it's still fresh the next morning, then love will surely be on its way. Try to remember your dreams – you may have seen your future spouse!

Summer Solstice crafts

In the Celtic calendar, Summer Solstice is a time of peak solar energy, when nature's creative powers are at their greatest heights, and a sun wheel, suncatcher or sun altar reminds us that we, like the sun, are now at our zenith of life and must appreciate this time of exuberance and joy while it lasts.

Summer Solstice sun wheel

Representing the sun and its rays, the ancient symbol of an equal-armed cross within a circle has been found carved upon the rocks of Neolithic monuments. Significant around the world in later eras, including in Celtic mythology, the sun wheel is the forerunner of the Christian cross.

Sun wheels can also be used to decorate the home or burn upon the fire, perhaps with prayers, petitions and written spells tied to them, together with offerings of flowers, leaves and herbs. Your sun wheel can be as simple or elaborate as you desire – either a plain cross that you use as a home decoration or an elaborate artwork with the written prayers of your community attached.

You will need

- *A pliable thin piece of wood, preferably hazel or willow, plus extra pieces of equal length to make the cross arms*
- *Embroidery thread of various colours or florist's wire*
- *Secateurs*
- *Straw, moss (or other greenery), flowers, ribbons and scraps of coloured cloth, plus a length of ribbon or string for hanging the wheel. Sunflowers, roses, honeysuckle and cloths of red, gold, yellow or orange all work well in this fiery season.*
- *Several pieces of paper and a pen*

Take your length of wood, and bend it into a circle, tying the ends together with thread or florist's wire. Embroidery thread is good for this, as it can be tied over and over to decorative effect.

Next, lie one of the shorter lengths over the other, so that they are at right angles to one another, to make a cross. Attach them together using thread.

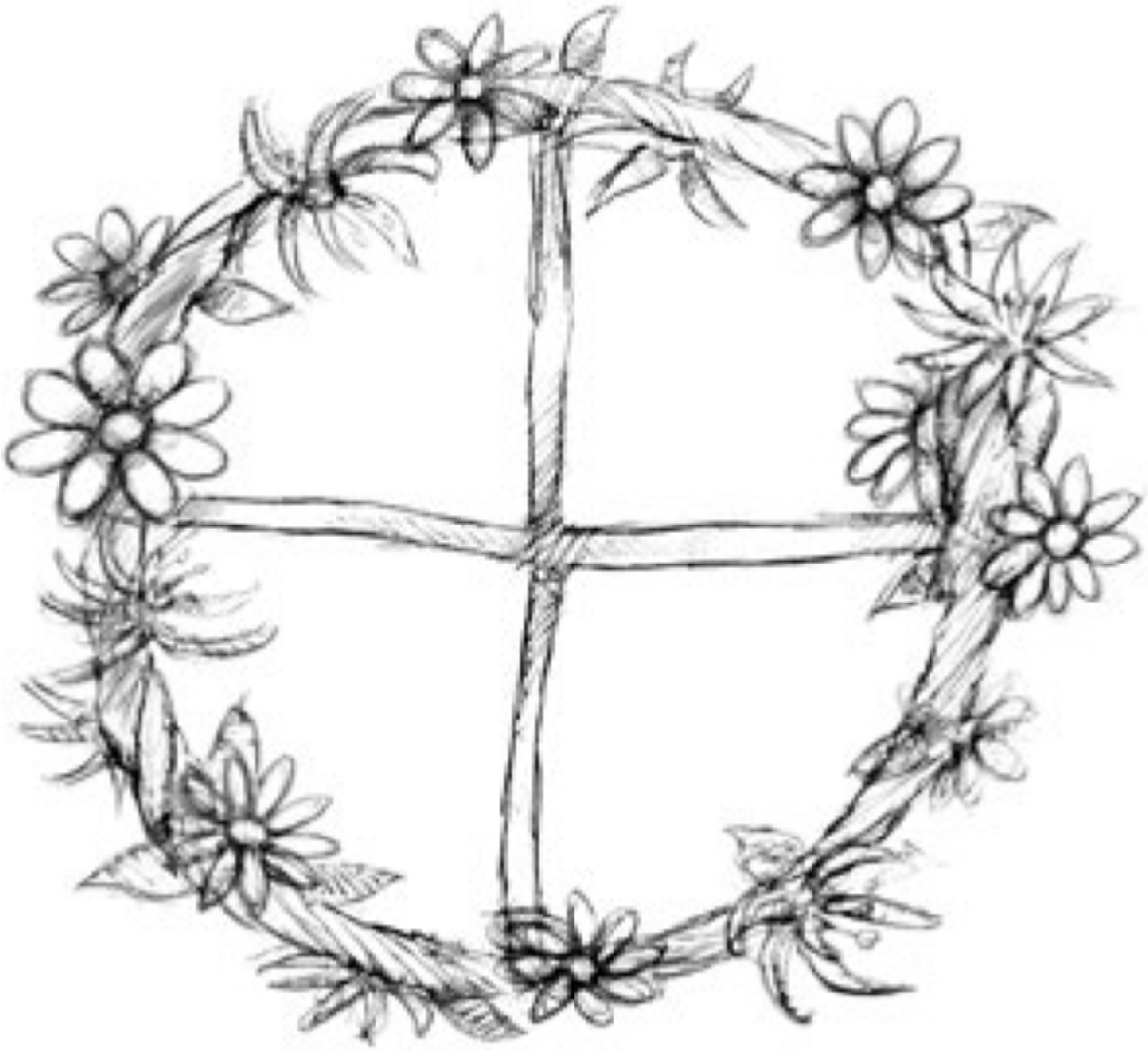
Attach the cross to the circle of wood, trimming the cross arms with secateurs to ensure a good fit. Then attach this to the circle using more thread.

Now decorate your circle by attaching the straw, greenery, flowers, ribbon or cloth using thread or florist's wire. Add a length of ribbon or string if you wish to suspend the wheel.

You may like to take some time to consider what you wish to transform in your life and, in a sacred space or meditative mood, write down your prayers, what you want to attract and what you are thankful for on the pieces of paper. Tie these on as well. You can add as many or as few as you like – this can be a wheel for you alone or for your whole community.

Bless and consecrate the sun wheel by holding it up to the sun, or by wafting it carefully over a solstice fire, asking for the sun's blessing upon it. Use your own words for this, or try these: 'Lord [*or* Lady] of the sun, bless this your symbol. May it bring us wisdom, joy and empowerment at this your sacred time!'

The sun wheel can be used as a decoration or a magical spell wheel in your home or shared space, bringing in the power of the solstice sun. Alternatively, burn it on a solstice fire as an offering. When throwing the wheel on the flames, ask the spirits of the fire and lord of the sun to bless you and hear your prayers. As it goes to the flames, let out a great shout of exuberance. The spell is done.



A sun wheel

Floral suncatcher

To make the most of your suncatcher, hang it in a sunny window so its colours really shine out.

You will need

- *2 pieces of card or 2 large paper plates*
- *Acrylic paints*
- *Glitter*
- *Clear sticky-back plastic (clear adhesive contact paper)*

- *Fresh flower petals (e.g. rose, calendula and nigella) and whole flat-headed flowers (e.g. daisies and forget-me-nots), leaves, feathers and photos*
- *Skewer*
- *PVA glue or double-sided adhesive tape*
- *3–4 paper fasteners (split pins)*
- *A length of thin ribbon*
- *Pens, scissors and ruler*

Decide on the diameter of your suncatcher and cut out two circles of card of your chosen size. In the centre of each circle of card, draw a second circle, 5cm (2in) smaller in diameter. Then cut out the middle circle to create a circular frame of card. Alternatively, cut out the middle section of two large paper plates.

Paint one side of each of the frames in any colours you choose – bright summer hues are best. Add some glitter, if you wish, and leave to dry on a sunny windowsill.

Cut out two pieces of sticky-back plastic, approximately the same size as your circlets of card. Remove the paper backing from one piece of the sticky-back plastic and lay it adhesive-side up on a flat surface. Place the flowers, petals, leaves, feathers, photos or any other flat decorative objects onto the sticky paper, remembering to leave a 2.5cm (1in) clear border around the edge. Arrange as you choose – a combination of bright colours and strong shapes works well, and you can use whole flowers as well as individual petals. Sprinkle with glitter, if desired.

Remove the adhesive backing from the second piece of sticky-back plastic and then carefully lay it carefully, sticky-side down, over your suncatcher to seal in the decorations. Take your time with this, and gently smooth out any bubbles.

Place your finished suncatcher between the two circular card frames (painted side outward), so they frame the suncatcher within. Then, using a skewer, carefully punch three or four holes at regular intervals around the entire frame, 1.25cm (½in) from the outside border of the card).

Seal the suncatcher within the frame using PVA glue, or double-sided adhesive tape, and then secure by inserting a paper fastener through each hole in the frame.

When the glue is dry, trim away any excess sticky-back plastic paper from around the edge of the frame to create a neat finish.

Carefully pierce another hole in the topmost edge of the cardboard frame, thread through a ribbon, and hang up in a sunny window.

A Summer Solstice altar

The Summer Solstice is the perfect time to bring the blessings of the sun and the abundant spirit of nature into your home. Try a single large white or gold candle to honour the sun, and golden crystals like pyrite, rutilated quartz, jasper and carnelian, as well as sunstones and amber, to welcome in the solar energy and hold it in your home. Place the crystals in sunlight periodically to energize them. You may also choose to hold these crystals while meditating on the sun, or place some under your pillow at night to increase their healing and empowering effects, and help maximize your happiness, success, enthusiasm and self-protection. Alternatively, decorate your altar with greenery and wildflowers to reflect the abundance of nature. Suitable colours for your altar are yellows and oranges to reflect solar energy, as well as gold.

Kitchen witchery at Summer Solstice

The warm days and long evenings of the Summer Solstice are perfect for lazing on the beach or by a river, soaking up the beauty of the natural world, foraging for wild salads or drinking some delicious cordial made from the flowers of the elder, known to the Celts as a tree sacred to the faeries.

Elderflower cordial

The taste of fresh homemade elderflower cordial really makes you feel like summer is here. With its heady lemon and floral aroma, it adds a subtle sensuality to everyday meals and celebrations. It is also useful for easing

fevers and attracting the blessings of the Sidhe or the faeries, which love the elder tree and its blossoms and are said to visit anyone who sleeps beneath an elder on the night of Midsummer's Eve. The following recipe makes 1 litre (1¾ pints) of cordial.

You will need

- *1 kg/2lb 4oz/5 cups white sugar*
- *1.5 litres/52fl oz/6 cups boiling water*
- *4 medium lemons, zest finely grated*
- *30 elderflowerheads, rinsed and shaken to ensure there are no insects*
- *5 tablespoons citric acid, to preserve (optional)*
- *Fine muslin cloth*
- *Sterilized bottles*

Place the sugar in a large bowl and cover with the boiling water. Stir well or until the sugar has completely dissolved.

Next, add the grated lemon zest, then quarter the lemons and add those, too. Add the flowerheads plus the citric acid to preserve it (optional). Cover with a cloth and leave to steep for 48 hours. Strain through a fine muslin cloth into another bowl, before decanting into sterilized bottles. Store in a cool, dark place.

Elderflower cordial should last several weeks in a cool dark place, and for several months if citric acid is added. Add to water or fizzy wine for a delicious drink or add an undiluted drizzle as a topping on ice cream or cheesecake.

Dandelion fritters

Fresh dandelion flowers and leaves can be added to salad, and the leaves can also be cooked like spinach. This fritter recipe is perfect for a wild-foraged solstice feast and can be repeated with thistles and elderflower blossom. This recipe should make enough batter to cover as many dandelion flowers as you choose.

You will need

- *110g/4oz/¾ cup plain (all-purpose) flour*
- *Pinch of salt*
- *1 egg, beaten*
- *60ml/2fl oz/¼ cup milk*
- *Fresh dandelion flowers (washed and whole)*
- *Sunflower oil, for frying*

Place the flour and salt in a large bowl and slowly add the beaten egg and milk to make a smooth batter. Holding the flowers by the stalk, dip them in the batter, then set aside.

Put the oil in a large pan on a medium heat and, when the oil is hot, add the dandelion flowers and deep fry until golden brown.

Remove from the oil using a slotted spoon and place on a paper towel to drain off the excess oil before serving.

Seasonal floral salad

Fresh salad is perfect for the season and eating locally grown vegetables and plants helps to connect us to the energies of the land where we live. Combine lettuce, baby spinach, thinly sliced radishes and sprouted beans or alfalfa, and try adding delicious and attractive edible flowers to really delight in the beauty of summer. Suitable flowers include nasturtiums, violets, carnations, hyssop flowers and marigolds (calendula). Summer berries can also be added, as can a small dash of raspberry vinegar.

Lighting the light

Solstice fires have been lit to celebrate the power of the sun for thousands of years. By lighting our own fire, we feel the connection with the previous generations who have done this before, and the bright firelight creates a beacon to send thanks to the sun and remind us of the abundance of our lives and our ability to realize our own potential.

Summer Solstice fire

A fire on the beach is wonderful at this time of year. Alternatively, light a large solstice candle and place it somewhere special, such as on a mantelpiece or a solstice altar. Surround it with flowers – roses or lavender are good for this as they last and dry well.

When you light your fire or candle, ask that the powers and the blessings of the sun are with the flames, and take a few minutes to meditate on their light. See them as a living symbol of the sun and its life-giving energy. Appreciate the moment, now that the wheel of the year is at its height, and we, like the sun, are at our most enlivened and vital.

Here, in the present moment, is where your greatest potential can be realized. Give thanks for the summer, for this and every summer that you have seen or will ever see. Feel pride and wonder at creation, acknowledging that you and all existence are sparks of the divine. Let the flames follow their own course and burn down when they will.

Sunrise and sunsets

During the days before, during and after the solstice, try to watch both the sunrise and sunset at least once, visualizing as you do so the sun's rays penetrating your heart, filling it with light. Greet the sun at dawn, and bid it farewell at sunset, and align with the solar rhythms as they manifest themselves on the earth. Spend a few moments just honouring the sun in silence, contemplating its power and splendour. Allow yourself to be aware of the sun as a physical deity, as well as a ball of fire, and open up to the

sense of awe this generates. The spiritual life is made of such moments, and it is important to experience simple rituals such as acknowledging the sunset and sunrise as much as possible. You needn't do anything at these times; rather, try to open yourself up to the experience of having the sun touch you instead.

A Summer Solstice visualization

We may not always be able to visit a sacred site aligned to the Summer Solstice, but in this guided journey you can visit this place in spirit, and in your imagination.

First focus upon your feet, and imagine you are walking barefoot through long grass, which glitters with dew all around you. It is night, with the first glimmers of dawn upon the horizon. The very air is a deep blue; the green of the grass is rich and deep. Everything appears to be dusted with silver in the predawn light.

It is warm, but a cool breeze stirs your hair. Your heart beats steady and slow to the rhythm of a drum you can hear a little distance away. As your awareness expands, you see there are others around you. There is an air of expectation, of suppressed excitement and joy. Everyone walks in rhythm to the drum. Slowly the crowd grows, and you ascend a gentle slope. On either side of you is an avenue of tall, pale standing stones, glittering silver grey and white. As you pass, you see a multitude of shifting forms upon their surfaces: the faces of men and women, animals, birds, flickering flames and the shapes of wind in the branches of trees; the memories of your people held for eternity on the stone.

Slowly and steadily you make your way along the avenue, hope and anticipation rising in your chest despite your weary feet. Ahead of you, rising up from the green turf, is a stone circle, pale and shimmering in the growing light. The first trill of birdsong seems to announce your arrival, and the air tingles with sanctity and power. The drumbeat is met by the sound of other drums. The very earth beneath your feet seems to thrum and rumble to their rhythm.

As you approach the circle, you are met by a group of men and women who stand guard at the entrance. Some are holding flaming torches and spears,

while others hold carved wooden maces with heads of flint. They bow in respect as you pass.

Entering the circle, the very air seems to buzz with power. The drums boom, making the earth vibrate even more strongly beneath your feet … you join with the others circling clockwise around the stones. Suddenly there is the sound of horns, and you see others toward the east, their arms raised as they blow into the mighty horns of an aurochs … the sound seems to fill the air and echo off the distant hills … everyone turns to face the east … as the sun rises!

Pouring golden light over the edge of the distant hills, the sun's rays stretch over the land and between two standing stones directly ahead of you, through a narrow gap. Like a golden laser, the light rises up your body until it reaches your heart. You close your eyes and take three deep breaths, feeling the light and the power of the sun at its height fill your body until your whole form is illuminated from within. As you open your eyes to meet the sun, the world around you shines with a heavenly glow, its inner divinity revealed. Strength and vitality course through your veins, like the very life force of the earth, raising you to ecstasy, as you know in this moment that you are made of the very fire of creation itself. Slowly the light fills the whole circle, and you feel the energy within you begin to settle. You take another three breaths, and another three, holding as much of the sun's power within you as you can so that you may carry it forward through the winter, still far ahead.

Bowing, you thank the sun for all its gifts, and then raise your arms and your face to bathe in the new light. A wave of joy and exultation seems to swell through the crowd all around you – as mothers hold up their babies to the sun for blessing, elders sit with their backs to the stones, their faces raised to the light and their eyes closed, gentle smiles upon their lips. A fire is lit in the centre of the circle and young men and women begin to shout and leap around the flames, and the drums begin once more, this time in celebration and delight …

Slowly, when you are ready, you turn to the west and leave the circle behind you. Reaching out your hands on either side, you brush the stones with your fingertips as you pass … and return the way you came. You know it is time to return home, to your body and the present time, so retrace your steps

along the path. Feel yourself back into your body, back to the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving around.

Remember to ground yourself afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

A Summer Solstice fire ceremony

The Summer Solstice is a traditional time for revelry and exuberant celebration, so excellent for all-night parties under the stars.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Try gathering everyone for an all-night vigil. Dress up in yellow and gold to honour the sun, or as faeries and wild things. Each person attending could bring a song to sing, a poem, a musical instrument to play or a tale to tell. Using drums and rattles in your celebration means that you can all create rhythms together to honour this sacred spirit time, and will lull some into visions and waking dreams.

Let young ones and the elders feel warm and snug with comfy chairs and blankets. Take time to notice the stars in the night sky before lighting a solstice fire as the sun rises, and greeting the dawn with cheers and roars to honour its fiery energy.

Practising fire poi, a modern version of the cliars whirled in circles of fire to honour the sun goddess Gréine, or gathering for a procession of burning torches around your local area (another traditional solstice practice), are also good ways to bring in the blessings of the sun. However you celebrate, allow your wild spirit to go free for the night, dance and sing, and laugh as much as you may to get your blood pumping and your eyes bright. Delight in being alive!

Fire poi at Summer Solstice

Celebrating alone

In the days leading up to the solstice, decorate your space by making sun wheels or suncatchers (see page 138 and 141) or a seasonal altar (see page 142). When you are ready to begin, create a sacred space by calling in the four directions (see page 14) and then call to any gods or ancestors to bless and support your life and path, to help with anything that concerns you. Suitable goddesses for the Summer Solstice are Áine and Gréine, as well as the Oak King and the gods Bel, Lugh and Ogmios. Use your own heartfelt words to call upon them, as this is always more authentic and powerful, or you might adapt these:

> *'Lord of the sun, king of the oak, please join us and bless us at this sacred time.'*

Now make an offering to the deity or spirits of the place. Lovingly leave a gift of spring water or a little cream, either poured upon the earth or placed in a simple bowl on the ground, asking aloud that the spirits of this place accept your gift to them.

Light a solstice fire, perhaps offering upon it a sun wheel adorned with prayers. This would be a good time to perform the Summer Solstice visualization (see page 147) or the stellar or Oak King meditations (see pages 133 and 129), as well as any spells or prayers, especially the St John's wort charm for luck and love (see page 136).

As this is the season of energy and productivity, take a few moments during the ceremony to set some intentions that will help you achieve your goals and live a life that aligns your inner needs and outer ambitions. Remember to give thanks to the spirits of summer and the heat of the sun, and feel gratitude for all the parts of your life in which you feel whole and strong.

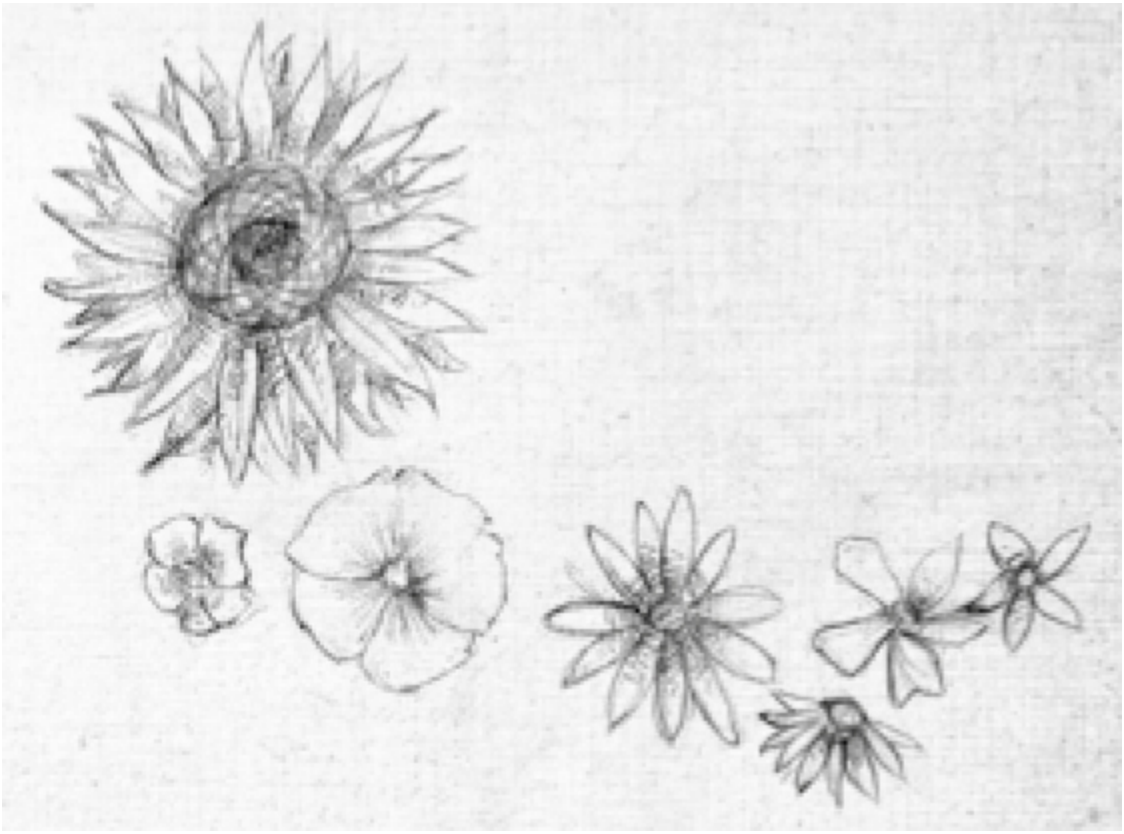
Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Summer Solstice

In celebrating the Summer Solstice, we celebrate the power of the sun and everything we have achieved in our lives thus far, as well as looking forward to the coming harvests, when we will reap the rewards of our endeavours and the gifts of the green earth.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER FIVE
LUGHNASADH



LUGHNASADH – ABUNDANCE

1 August (northern hemisphere)
1 February (southern hemisphere)

Lughnasadh is the beginning of the harvest and spans the six weeks leading up to the Autumn Equinox. It is the time to celebrate the first fruits, the fields of barley growing under the warm summer sun, and honour the generosity and gifts of the earth. Lughnasadh means 'the commemoration of Lugh' – Lugh is the Irish solar god of justice and skill. Lugh declared that there should be a feast on this day in honour of his foster mother, the goddess Tailtiu. She cleared the plains of Ireland so that the people could begin to grow crops, and she died as a result of her hard work. Tailtiu asked Lugh to hold games in her honour every August, prophesizing that as long as the games were held there would be 'corn and milk in every house'.

Key Themes

Cross quarter
the first harvest
birthing

Celebrating and honouring
abundance
contests
prowess
pride
accomplishment
first fruits
community

deeds and achievements
parenthood
responsibility
warriorhood
the wild earth

The name Tailtiu is probably derived from Talantiu, which means ‘the great one of the earth’. Lughnasadh has an even older Gaelic name: Bron Trogain, meaning ‘the sorrows (or sacrifice) of the earth’ – a term connected with the labour pains of childbirth, and suggesting that the life-giving abundance of nature was honoured at this time, together with the precious agricultural skills that transform this abundance into crops and livestock.

At Lughnasadh the soul comes into maturity, just as the earth herself does. Honouring the goddess Tailtiu at this time means honouring her as Mother, the life-giver, and this gift is an act of great sacrifice on her part. As we see with the story of Tailtiu, this time of fullness is due to hard work and our ease is indeed the result of the sacrifice of the earth. However, this is also a season to feel the sun on our skin and take pride in the challenges we have faced, the journeys we have made, the skills, knowledge and experience we have now acquired. Tailtiu wants to see our skills and abilities shine. She wants us to be the very best we can be, to learn, to develop, to evolve.

This Lughnasadh, honour the cultivated and the wild gifts of the good earth, revelling in nature’s abundance. Meditate on the sacrifice of the goddess Tailtiu inherent in the blessings of the coming harvest. But also take time to feel proud of who you are and of what you contribute to those around you. Try to soak up a sense of achievement, letting it swell your heart together with the warming rays of the sun. In remembering to give back to the earth, and to life, as much as we receive – sowing and reaping in equal balance, we too can live in honour and come into our true power.

Lunasa and Lammas

In modern Irish the month of August is known as Lunasa – a modern spelling for Lughnasadh. Another name for Lughnasadh is Lammas, which comes from the Anglo-Saxon festival at this time, Hlaef Mass, meaning

‘loaf mass’. This name refers to the importance of the grain harvest and signals the change from honouring the earth goddess and her gifts of wild foods to revering the ‘masculine’ skills of taming the land with agriculture, the sacrifice of John Barleycorn (see page 162).

Gathering Day customs

In Wales Lughnasadh was often called ‘Calan Awst’ or ‘Gathering Day’ and was held at the beginning of August although not necessarily on the first of the month. Several games with pre-Christian overtones were enacted, including one called ‘rhibo’, in which two lines of men would link arms, and a man and a woman would be tossed into the air and caught between them, perhaps referring to human lives caught in endless cycle of summer and winter.

Another was the tradition to grab any man or woman entering the harvested field, wrapping them in hay until they granted a favour – usually a kiss. For women this was called ‘giving them a green gown’ and for men ‘stretching their backs’, with obvious sexual and fertility implications. This may be an old folk memory of embodying the harvest spirit, or god/goddess of the grain, and enlisting their help and blessings for the harvest and the fertility of the next year’s crops.

Wake fairs

Lughnasadh has been celebrated in different ways in different places and eras. Lughnasadh funerary games were held in Ireland up until the Norman conquest in the 12th century. These honoured Tailtiu and the labours of the earth, giving up much of its life as food for the people. These were held especially at Teltown, or Tailteann, named after Tailtiu, in County Meath. During the games, ‘Teltown marriages’ were performed, enacting the marriage of Lugh with the goddess Eire, after whom Ireland is named. This combined with a celebration of the harvest, as well as competition between warriors, paradoxically blending fulfilment and sacrifice, life and death. It was presided over by the king, to whom chieftains would bring tributes of

wild foods, such as venison, fish and fruits, which were the province of Tailtiu. Bread was not included as this was made from a cultivated crop.

The feats of prowess and contests common in the Irish Lughnasadh celebrations have survived into modern times in the races and tugs of war that are still common features of festivals in August, sometimes known as ‘wake fairs’, across the UK and Ireland. The various Highland games of Scotland are also likely to have stemmed from this tradition, although there were other regional variations.

Lugh

Lugh was worshipped all across Celtic Europe and was the patron of many towns, including Carlisle on the Scottish border, Lyons in France and Leiden in Holland. He is also analogous with the Welsh god Llew and traces of him can also be seen in the Arthurian knight of legend Sir Lancelot.

Lugh means ‘bright’ and his father was Cian, meaning ‘darkness’; while his mother, Eithlenn, was the daughter of the old sun god, ‘Balor of the evil eye’, and equitable with gods such as Bel and Baal (see page 87). Lugh is famous for his prowess with the solar lance or spear, and for killing Balor at the Battle of Moytura, securing the rule of his people, the divine Tuatha dé Danann (people of the goddess Danu), over Ireland and initiating a new phase of prosperity and abundance.

Lugh is said to have granted mercy to the tyrant King Bres after the battle in return for the knowledge of sowing, reaping and ploughing. By forcing the knowledge of agriculture from the old gods he ushered in a new era of civilization for humanity, who transitioned from being hunter-gatherers to becoming farmers for the first time.

Lugh, warrior and judge

Warriorhood

Sometimes thought of as a sun god, Lugh is, however, more often associated with the power and skill of the warrior, and is also seen as a wise judge and overseer of legal contracts. These latter aspects were particularly relevant at Lughnasadh, when marriages and business deals were made, and great races and contests were held. The games were tests of endurance and prowess, opportunities for the warriors and young people to show off their abilities to gain renown and respect. Warriorhood, in the Celtic mind, is not a matter of sheer violence but rather a position of honour and responsibility, requiring excellent conduct, mature skill, wisdom, eloquence and even magical ability. A warrior was rightly proud of his or her actions, because they contributed to the wellbeing of the family or tribe.

In many Celtic stories, the greatest warriors were women, and the finest perhaps was Scathach, or Shadow, a Scottish warrior woman from the Isle of Skye. She taught the hero Cuchulain, the son of Lugh, who was conceived when Lugh visited his mother in spirit. Scathach taught a complex form of Celtic martial art, which has been forgotten today, involving forms such as 'the salmon leap', and 'the shield feat', giving warriors the reputation of almost superhuman ability.

A prayer to Lugh

Lugh can be called upon to help you overcome difficulties and to inspire you to learn new skills or make good strides in anything you are trying to achieve. Although he may sometimes be experienced as being rather stern and serious, he will understand your travails and will assist if you ask for help sincerely and respectfully. Speak to him as you would a wise and powerful warrior king with great power and responsibility. He will undoubtedly draw out these qualities in you, too. You can use your own words, or you might try these to get started:

> *'Lugh of the long arm, lord of many skills, honour and praise to you. Please come to my aid. I ask your assistance to learn all that I need to grow and overcome my difficulties honourably and with pride. So may it be.'*

John Barleycorn

The traditional ballad ‘John Barleycorn’ celebrates the spirit of the barley crop, its journey from sowing to reaping, and the beer and whisky that can be made from it. Some scholars also relate John Barleycorn to Beowa, the Anglo-Saxon god of barley and agriculture, whose name means ‘barley’, and who features in many Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies, as well as being a possible source of the hero tale *Beowulf*. There are many versions of the ballad, including the 15th-century Scottish verse, ‘Quhy Sowld Nocht Allane Honorit Be’, the most famous being published by Robert Burns in 1782. It opens with these lines:

‘There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn should die.

They took a plough and plough’d him down,
Put clods upon his head,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn was dead.

But the cheerful Spring came kindly on,
And show’rs began to fall;
John Barleycorn got up again,
And sore surpris’d them all.’

The great ones of the earth

There are several earth goddesses in the Celtic tradition, versions of Mother Nature or the Earth Mother. In the Celtic view, all of creation stems from the feminine divine in nature. For example, as well as the Irish Tailtiu (see page 156) and Danu (see page 87), in Celtic Europe there is also Aerecura,

Nantosuelta and Rosmerta, among others, each with slightly different attributes, but each a carer, provider and mother to her people. Numerous surviving sculptures and inscriptions honour the triple mother goddess (see page 19). Representing earthy life, fertility and the gifts of nature, these are primarily mother goddesses, whether their offspring are children, animals, wild foods or crops. In Celtic tradition these goddesses are immanent in the many harvest hills that were used as sites for fairs and celebrations, and can be understood as embodiments of her rounded pregnant belly, birthing the crops.

A prayer to the earth goddess

Earth goddesses can be called upon for support with all of life's travails, and they are the special friends of mothers and children, and those seeking comfort or trying to contact their earthy, giving side. Call upon them as a specific deity, such as Tailtiu or Danu, or as an overarching Earth Mother, in whatever way feels right to you. Your own heartfelt words will be the most effective, but you can try these, based upon a Scots Gaelic augury recorded in the 19th century but surely spoken in various forms for hundreds of years before then:

'Goddess of this sacred earth be before me, goddess behind me,
Goddess of the green fields and the golden, be over me and beneath me,
Goddess of the dun earth and the green shoots be within me and without me,
Goddess of the mothers and the children lead me,
Cast your protection over me, guide me and bless me, grant me your tender care.'

You might want to follow this prayer by addressing the goddess directly and thanking her for all her gifts and support over the previous year, and listing all the things you are grateful for.

Honouring the goddess of the wild earth

Try this meditation to connect with the earth goddess, drawing in her nurturing wild and loving energy to support and guide you.

Begin by sitting comfortably and closing your eyes. Take some time to let the activities of the day fall away and your body slow down into the present moment before taking three deep breaths.

Imagine you can see and feel your bare feet on warm, dry grass. You are standing on a tall rounded hill, close clipped in places by sheep and edged with wildflowers and tall grasses. All around you can see for miles out across the land. A warm sun beats down, and the air is filled with the lazy droning of bees.

You walk across a faint track through the grass, over the hill and to a stand of trees offering gentle shade. Here the grass is longer and flowers brush your ankles. Wild roses and honeysuckle tangle through the undergrowth, and new berries, still green but blushing slowly into reds and purples, garland the elder trees and the hawthorns with the promise of autumn ahead.

A small white butterfly flits past and leads you onward, its delicate wings shimmering through the dappled light and shade. A gentle breeze musses the branches and the drone of the bees grows louder. There is a quality in the air, a tingling like electricity that makes your heart beat faster but keeps you utterly silent. For all its untamed beauty, you know this is a sacred place.

Ahead the butterfly dances in the air. Another joins it, and then another, spinning around each other slowly. As you watch, more and more butterflies join the dance, spiralling and weaving among one another, forming a denser and denser cloud of shimmering white. Gradually, to your astonishment, the cloud of butterflies takes shape, slowly you can see the rounded curve of a hip, a breast, the sweep of an arm, as the butterflies form the shape of a tall woman, her hair great drifts of wings flittering around her.

With the voice of the bees she speaks. ‘Welcome little one,’ she says, and there is such warmth, such honey in her words, her voice, as she opens her arms to you, tipping her proud and beautiful head to you. Like a child returning to its mother you step forward, and feel yourself lifted up and

spun gently, before she places you back down upon the ground. The butterfly woman dissipates, spinning around you like a cloud of blossom, but you know she is still here, all around you, in the earth, the trees, the grasses and flowers. Her form shifts and condenses again, and you find yourself face to face with her once more.

Your heart beats loudly in your chest, swelling with love for this lovely woman, this great goddess of life. You may find there is much to be said, or perhaps it is time to just be in her presence, that this moment of communion and togetherness says all that need be said. Do not rush but allow this to be as it is, a gift from her. She truly loves you as she loves all her children, all of creation upon this green earth.

In time you find her image fading and you know your time together is fading too, for now, though she is always here, always within your reach should you seek Her. She surrounds you every day in every flower, every tree, every animal, in the laughter of every child and in the warmth of every embrace. Soon you find yourself alone upon the hillside, and you walk slowly across the warm grass back to your body.

With every step you feel yourself coming back to the everyday world, till you return fully to yourself in the here and now. Take your time, wriggle your toes and fingers, and feel yourself fully back in your body and every day consciousness.

You may need to ground yourself further by eating and drinking. You may also choose to record your experiences in a journal.

Celtic starlore at Lughnasadh

Lughnasadh in the Celtic lands of the north marks the time when summer has reached its peak and turns toward the first moments of autumn fruitfulness. The nights are still quite short, with long, lingering, balmy evenings.

In the northern hemisphere, to the west of the sky and to the left of the Corona Borealis in the north, is the constellation of Hercules, the Hero. Hercules is a Roman version of the Celtic god Ogmios, who was a psychopomp and a club-wielding champion of great eloquence and inspiration. He is known in the Old and Middle Irish periods as Ogma

Grianainech, ‘Ogma Sunface’, the champion warrior of the Tuatha dé Dannan. His fiery countenance was lit with the light of divine inspiration and he was able to rouse many warriors into battle, and even onto death, with the power of his words. Ogmios has strong solar qualities, reflected in his journey to and from death, as well as his great radiance, making him a suitable god to remember at this time.

As summer comes to fullness in August the beautiful constellation of Cygnus the Swan can be seen rising into the northeast. In the Celtic tradition, the Swan, known as Eala (Ey-la), is associated with the gifts of poetry and the grace of the goddess, marking a time of ease and sensual abundance, when the fire of life, the kundalini of the earth is riding high. Some believe that Cygnus the Swan was known in Celtic lore as a goose, rather than a swan. Geese, known as Gèadh, are treasured birds in Celtic lore. Prized for their eggs more than for their flesh, they teach the wise uses of resources, another important factor at this time. Representing the generative principle, they also teach how to protect and preserve the family and tribe. The Iron Age Celts sometimes connected them with warfare, as even domesticated geese are powerful and aggressive birds, able to fiercely protect their brood and territory. They are also known for their massive migrations – an aspect that also links them to ideas of spirit flight and journeys to the realm of the dead. Their connection to Lughnasadh reminds us that the abundance of this time must be honoured and treated wisely so that it can support us through the times of decline and scarcity over winter.

Lughnasadh stellar meditation: Celebrating your inner light

This meditation focuses on the constellation of Cygnus and can help you tune into the natural and sacred dramas of Lughnasadh, so that you can celebrate the vast power within you – the part of you that is divine, made of star stuff as old as the universe itself – and feel the great never-ending generative power of the stellar goddess.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes relax gently behind your closed lids and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are at the base of a large hill, beneath a deep blue evening sky, bright with stars. You begin to climb the

hill. It is steep and grassy and sometimes you need to scramble on all fours, clutching at the earth, but as you climb the ascent becomes easier and easier, and you go faster and faster, as if something from above is pulling you up. The night sky gathers around you as you climb higher and higher, and far overhead the constellation of Cygnus arises, like a great, outstretched bird soaring across the heavens.

As you climb faster, you begin to stand taller as you go, your legs stretching and your feet skimming the ground beneath you in swift, easy strides. Suddenly, you crest the top of the hill and find that you keep going, taking flight now out into the bright night sky. There is no fear, only elation and freedom. You know you are perfectly safe. As you rise higher and higher into the sky, you see Cygnus becoming brighter and brighter, clearer and clearer, a vast white bird, glowing bright with the light of a thousand stars, soaring and swooping through space. As you watch you feel joy and vigour, coursing through you, as if you could fly for ever, and you follow in the great bird's wake.

Slowly you notice that you, too, are glowing in the reflected light of the bird, and as you look at and feel this light all around you, you know that you are shining out from the inside as well. There is a part of you, a seed of light, impossibly ancient and ever new, that was born out here in the heavens; it responds now to the great bird, and glows brighter and brighter, remembering itself after long years in the mortal world on earth.

In time you see that you are not alone, flying in this great stellar migration. There are others surrounding you near and far, also part of the great flock, and together you create a growing body of light, the depths of space around you growing lighter and lighter. And as the light grows so you begin to hear music, clear slow chiming and intoning, like the music of a vast crystal gong.

Ahead of you the great white bird of light soars and turns, spiralling, leaving a greater and greater arc of light trailing behind it until this grows into a vast starry vortex, impossibly bright. You spin and tumble into it, held somehow by the light itself that supports you, holding you gently as a baby.

The light grows brighter and brighter until you feel your physical body merging with the light and the chiming, your very cells vibrating with its celestial song. Renewed and reborn, fierce and strong, overflowing with life and vigour, silver fire in your veins, you know in this moment you are star stuff indeed; here the very spark of life originated and dwells within you.

Slowly, gently as a feather descending, you begin to ease out of the spiralling light, and ahead of you, you can see the blue jewel that is planet Earth. On strong wings of light you soar toward it with ease and grace, flying lower now over oceans and mountains, over green forests and deserts, over houses and roads. The land below is familiar now and you see your own home, and you remember your body below, seated comfortably, breathing deeply. You return to your physical self easily and gently, yet deep within you the light remains, together with the memory of all you have experienced. Know it is yours, within, always.

Take your time, wriggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes as you return to the everyday world once more.

You may need to earth yourself carefully after this exercise, by eating and drinking and taking your time to feel yourself back in your body and the everyday world.

Lughnasadh magic

This is the perfect time to make use of the natural resources around you to weave seasonal magic that helps you tune in to nature's power and abundance.

Smudge sticks

In Native American traditions, smudge sticks are most commonly made of white sage (*salvia apiana*), but they can be made of all sorts of magical and sweet-smelling herbs. They can then be burned and wafted around for cleansing and protecting a space, ridding it of negative energies or attracting beneficent spirits. In the Celtic tradition this is called 'saining' and across the northern hemisphere there are many plants that were used for these

purposes, especially vervain (see page 135), mugwort, meadowsweet, juniper, lavender and rosemary, which are all at their best during this time.

You will need

- *Fresh herbs of your choosing, e.g. vervain, mugwort, meadowsweet, juniper, lavender and rosemary*
- *Embroidery thread*
- *Feather fan and shell/heatproof dish (optional)*

Gather the herbs when they are at their peak, all through the month of August, and leave them to wilt somewhere dry, such as in an airing cupboard, for 24 hours.

Bunch them tightly into bundles about 5cm (2in) thick, with the stems together to form a posy. Take a length of embroidery thread and secure the stems together at one end, using a tight knot. Continue wrapping the thread around the stems a few more times, finishing with a second knot. Repeat at the other end of the smudge stick, and in the middle.

Alternatively, instead of binding again at the other end and in the middle, wind the thread around the smudge stick, using the least possible thread, making a spiral pattern until you reach the top. Turn the bundle round and spiral the thread back down to the start again, to create a criss-cross pattern. Secure at the bottom with a tight knot.

Hang your bundles to dry in a sunny window for a few weeks until dry.

Using a smudge stick

Carefully light one end and, as soon as it catches alight, blow out the flame so you are left with glowing embers. Waft the smoke around using your hand or a feather fan. You may want to hold a shell or dish beneath the smudge stick to catch any falling embers. Should the embers falter, coax them out by blowing upon them.

Waft the smoke in each of the four directions (see page 14) with thanks and prayers to the spirits, always thanking the spirit of the plant you have used in your own words for its sacrifice and gifts, and to honour the good work it is doing for you.

A smudge stick

Three bees in a bag charm

Bees have long been considered magical beings, sacred to the earth goddess as well as to the sun. In Ancient Greece, the priestesses of Artemis and Demeter were the Melissae (‘bees’), and in English folklore there is a tradition of ‘telling the bees’ all the news of your family, as well as your hopes and fears, as they serve as powerful spirit allies. Bee magic is perfect

for August, when they are most active and can attract the sunny, joyous and abundant energies of the season.

This ancient charm for household blessing and protection calls upon the magic of the bees and their connection to the earth goddess, as well as their magical association with the sun, to draw positive energies in to your home. Once upon a time three dead bees were used and it is fine to use these if you come across some, but bees are precious, endangered insects and should never be killed. It is possible to buy metal or ceramic bees from bead and jewellery craft suppliers. Another option is to gather pictures of bees or make them out of rolled pieces of clay or papier-mâché.

Once you have your three bees, place them in a pretty, gold-coloured pouch. As you place each bee in the bag, thank it and ask it to bless you and your home, either using your own words or saying this charm:

> *'Pretty bee, busy bee, please bring your magic to my/our home. Make my/our life here honey sweet and full of sunshine. Keep me/us safe and prosperous. Pretty bee, busy bee I thank you and blessed be.'*

Hang the pouch up somewhere sunny in your home, and remember to always treat your bees with respect and care, telling them about your life from time to time, and thanking them for their help.

Gathering seeds for the future

This is an excellent time to take advantage of nature's abundance, both in the garden and in the wild, and begin to gather seeds as they ripen. The first of the barley and wheat fields will be reaped now, and a portion of their seed will be used to sow next year's crop. The same can be done with wildflowers or garden plants that you want to cultivate.

Collecting seed is a special, magical act reminding us of the cycle of the seasons and the need to invest in the future. These tiny seeds will blossom and grow into next year's beauty and abundance, and by caring for this cycle in our own way we can participate in this mystery and become one of

nature's guardians. Before gathering seeds from the wild, check if you need the landowner's permission.

Find some envelopes or brown paper bags and label and date them. If the seeds are ready to be gathered, they will fall easily into a paper bag when the plant is shaken. Although some plants self-seed best from fresh green seed, the majority need to dry out and have a cold period of dormancy first, so leave the seeds in the paper envelopes or bags somewhere dry but not warm, such as a shed or garage. Look out especially for the various types of poppy, as the seedheads will rattle when they are ready and are easy to harvest, producing thousands of tiny seeds. Never take more than a few seeds, scattering a portion at the foot of the plant should you accidentally take more than you intended. A small quantity of seed will often go a long way. Thank the plants and their spirits for their gifts as you gather their delicate offerings, and be conscious of what you are doing, being sure to use all the seed you gather and not wasting any of this precious potential.

Lughnasadh crafts

During Lughnasadh our days are filled with sunshine and warmth, and crafting a cornucopia, floral girdle or salt-dough goddess reminds us of the abundance of our lives and these precious sun-filled moments.

Floral girdle

Making a floral girdle, or belt, is a simple way to feel special during the celebration, helping to contact the god and goddess within. Fertility girdles were worn by priestesses in Egypt, Minoan Crete and many other places, to honour the earth. They can be made quite easily, using whatever flowers you have growing nearby. Ivy, long-stalked flowers or corn are all excellent; simply sew them on to a sash or scarf that is wide enough to wrap around your hips, using thread or twine. Alternatively, string flowerheads or ears of corn along a piece of embroidery thread, using a needle, and tie at the ends. Depending on your materials, you may need to knot each flower in place or simply push the stalk through the cloth. Use your creativity and trust yourself; you will be surprised how easy it is to make something beautiful to unleash the wilder nature of the wearer.

Cornucopia

A corn or wheat ‘cornucopia’ – horn-shaped woven basket to fill with flowers, fruit and grain – can be difficult to weave, but can be bought ready made at floral suppliers. The idea can also be adapted quite easily, using a simple basket or a pretty bowl. A small sample of crops, flowers, berries and fruit makes a beautiful display of the natural produce of the first harvest of the year, as a symbol of the earth’s bounty at this time. Place on your altar and ask that the earth goddess bless it, or leave it as an offering out in a special place out on the land, or share it as part of a Lughnasadh feast.

Salt-dough goddess

Reminiscent of the artisan breads that are made at this time, a salt-dough goddess figurine is easy to make and can be used to decorate your altar or sacred space. You can customize your design using seeds, leaves, dried flowers and berries, stones and crystals.

You will need

- *450g/16oz/3½ cups plain (all-purpose) flour*
- *150g/5½oz/⅔ cup table salt*
- *310ml/10fl oz/1¼ cups water*
- *Greaseproof paper*
- *Decorations of your choice: food colouring, paints, glue, seeds, leaves, dried flowers and berries, stones, crystals, etc.*
- *Acrylic glaze*
- *Hook with flat panel for wall hanging (optional)*

In a large bowl, combine the flour and the salt and add the water a little at the time until you get a smooth dough-like consistency. Mix and knead the dough until it is firm and smooth. You might like to split the dough in half at this point to make two smaller figures rather than one big one. If you wish, add food colouring to the dough at this stage (golden yellow, red, brown or green are all suitable), adding a little at a time until it's the shade you want.

Roll and shape into a simple doll design, or add more details if you feel more confident, folding, smoothing and tucking edges underneath for the best, tidiest look. There is no wrong way to do this so have fun and experiment.

Depending upon your decorations you may be able to add stones and crystals by gently pressing them into the dough, otherwise they can be stuck on with glue later.

Place on a baking sheet lined with greaseproof paper and place in a preheated oven, 140°C/275°F/gas mark 1, for 3–4 hours. The dough should be cooked slowly and checked often, as you may want to move it or turn it over carefully so it dries out evenly. This process can't be rushed.

When it is dried and cooled, paint and decorate your goddess as you wish. Smothering her with leaves and dried flowers looks pretty, for example, or you can paint on your designs.

When you have finished decorating, cover the figure with spray-on or brush-on acrylic glaze.

If you want to hang on a wall you can find a suitable hook, with a flat panel to glue on the back, at DIY stores.

A Lughnasadh altar

This is the first of the harvest festivals and decorations of gold, orange and red are suitable, together with green. You might like to include natural objects: corn and wheat, ripe crops of beans or salads, pretty stones and seashells from days at the beach all make evocative decorations. Bowls of fruit or a cornucopia (see page 175) are both lovely touches, as is a simple wooden bowl of berries and wildflowers, to honour the earth goddess.

Kitchen witchery at Lughnasadh

There is a great deal of seasonal fresh food to be found everywhere during Lughnasadh and gathering locally sourced produce for a wholesome meal is a wonderfully simple way to honour the harvest and give thanks for the abundance in our lives, within our own bodies and in the world around us.

Boxty

Boxty, meaning 'poor house bread', is a traditional Irish potato pancake, also known in some parts as 'poundy'. There are many different recipes but all contain finely grated raw potatoes. Serves two.

You will need

- *150g/5½oz/1 cup cooked and mashed potatoes*
- *2 eggs, beaten*
- *150g/5½oz/1 cup grated raw potatoes*
- *150g/5½oz/½ cup plain (all-purpose) flour, plus extra for dusting*
- *2 tsp baking powder*
- *40ml/1¼oz/3 tablespoons milk*
- *Pinch of caraway seeds (optional)*
- *3 tbsp butter*

Place all the ingredients into a large bowl with 2 tablespoons of the butter and stir gently to combine.

To make the patties, turn the mixture onto a lightly floured board and divide into 4–6 equal portions. Gently flatten each with the back of a spoon.

Heat the remaining tablespoon of butter in a large frying pan over a medium heat. When melted, place the patties in the pan and fry for about 5 minutes each side until golden brown, then serve immediately.

Raspberry vinegar

This delicious late-summer recipe makes 4–6 servings and can be used as salad dressing, over ice cream, mixed with lemonade or fizzy spring water, or poured into pans or roasting dishes after cooking meat for fruity gravy, and is also excellent for soothing a sore throat.

You will need

- *570ml/20fl oz/2½ cups red wine vinegar*
- *570 ml/20fl oz/2½ cups water*
- *450 g/1lb/3 cups raspberries*
- *1 tsp white sugar*

Place all the ingredients in a large pan on a medium heat, bring to simmering point, then reduce the heat to low and leave to simmer gently for

10 minutes. Alternatively, combine all the ingredients in a bowl, cover and leave in a cool, dark place for two days to infuse.

Finally, strain through a fine-mesh sieve or muslin cloth and pour into a sterilized bottle.

Lemonade

A wonderful summer treat, bringing clarity to mind and zest to the spirit. Visualize sunlight within the lemons, to add a little extra magic.

You will need

- *3 lemons, juice and zest*
- *450g/1lb/2¼ cups sugar*
- *2 tsp citric acid, to preserve (optional)*
- *570ml/20fl oz/2½ cups boiling water*

Combine the lemon juice and zest in a large jug with the sugar, the citric acid (if you want it to keep longer) and the boiling water. Stir until all the sugar is dissolved. Cover the jug with plastic wrap and place in the fridge until the lemonade is cool and you're ready to serve.

A roll of deeds and achievements

The god Lugh is the master of all skills: pre-eminent warrior, accomplished healer and noble cup bearer – this is both the role of a servant, giving honour to others, and a place of honour in itself. At Lughnasadh, the games and competitions were opportunities to show off athletic and warrior abilities and also other skills, with which to win renown and the respect of your community, and the approval and blessing of Lugh himself. In the same way we can call on Lugh during Lughnasadh to help us celebrate our deeds and achievements.

Feeling pride

Spend some time meditating on the past year, or on your spiritual or life journey so far, and prepare a written list, perhaps as a roll, of your deeds and achievements. Remember these need not be obvious things, such as physical prowess or accumulation of wealth: acts of heroism, in the outer world or within your own consciousness and life story, are especially worthy, as are deeds of love, charity or compassion. Skills of every kind should be included, and times when you overcame difficulties, of any type, are all achievements, too.

In addition, you can include moments in your life when you became aware of mistakes, as these are also important achievements along your journey. It is immensely healing and empowering to begin to see ourselves in this way, and to present our causes for pride to our fellows and our gods.

Prepare your list and, either alone or in company, read it aloud in the invoked presence of Lugh himself. This can be done as part of a Lughnasadh celebration, or as a simple private ritual. Focus on how you felt, as well as what you thought and experienced. Reading out your list of achievements can then become an act of power-retrieval and pride-building, as well as providing a punctuation point in your life story, placing any difficulties that have been overcome, or hard work that you have gone through, in the context of your past history, rather than seeing them as ‘present trouble’.

A Lughnasadh visualization

In this guided journey you can connect deeper with the spiritual abundance of the season by exploring in your inner vision the ancient harvest festivals and honouring the earth goddess with your own spiritual offering in gratitude for your life and its many gifts.

You find yourself walking across a rich meadow. The day is warm and the sky is blue and clear above you. The long, rich grass is full of flowers in a vast rainbow of colours: blue and violet, orange, scarlet and golden yellows. Crickets hum and click around your ankles and clouds of butterflies and bees dart and flutter in the air around you. High above, you hear the call of a buzzard.

Around you are low, green hills and rich pastureland stretching as far as the eye can see. You are not alone, others are heading in the same direction with you, funnelling into an avenue of white standing stones that form a path across the fields and over the crest of the wide hill you are walking along.

As you step between the stones you take a moment to examine their shimmering white surfaces. There are tiny flecks of quartz glimmering in the rock. The half-formed shapes of animals and human faces seem to come out from their sculpted sides in the subtlest of ways, one image appearing to form another from a different angle as you walk by, in a play of light and shade. You walk in between one pair of stones after another. While some are wide and almost diamond shaped, others are tall and thin, but all are huge, the work of many hands to prepare and erect. Their windblown faces tell you that these stones have stood here for many long years.

You continue along the avenue of stones. Men and women, young and old surround you, all making their way over the hill. Some carry baskets and bunches of grain or flowers. Children play and sing, running to and fro around their parents as they plod steadily through the grass. Ahead you can hear the sound of distant drums, and the music grows louder as you crest the hill and the expanse of the land opens up before you, the rounded belly of the harvest hill rising up in front of you, a sudden surprise.

Crowds of people swarm around its base, and the sound of drums and flutes are much louder here, the earth seeming to vibrate to the music. There are small huts and cooking fires, and groups of young men and women laughing and shouting. To one side there are enclosures for horses and cattle, and a great deal of business seems to be taking place. But what takes your breath away is the hill itself. Perfectly round at its base, it rises up like a pregnant woman's belly, nestled in beside the curve of the hill you stand on. Its smooth sides seem impossible and you know that this harvest hill is a great wonder, made by the men and women of this land over many years. All over its sides swirl a vast mandala of flowers and fruits, bunches of wheat and barley and green leaves all laid down in an immense, complex pattern, a knotwork design of many living colours.

You follow the crowds walking slowly around the foot of the hill, and see that each person is ushered in turn to a place where a thin path of pale chalk

snakes it way to the summit. Each person is met at the foot of this path by a man or a woman wearing red, who takes offerings to the land from the people, carrying the gifts up the hill to position them in the design. Suddenly, it is your turn and you think for a moment that you carry no offering, have nothing to give. You stand with empty arms in front of the priestess of the sacred hill.

She looks at you with deep, dark eyes and speaks to you, ‘What is in your heart? What are you most proud of this year?‘

You answer without thinking, without hesitation. Whatever comes into your mind first is your true response; there is no right or wrong reply. Immediately you feel something in your hands and so you offer it up to the woman before you. Whatever this object is, it represents your pride, your joy, your accomplishments, what you hold most dear in your heart at this time. Have no fear, whatever you see is taken by the priestess as part of the great pattern upon the hill, and is blessed but is never lost. She takes it from your hands with thanks and a smile, and you are ushered on past the hill back into the crowds.

As you walk away, consider what it is you saw, what you answered and gave to the woman. It may not be what you expected. It is a symbol of your gifts, and there is power in it, but what you hold in your heart, what you strive and long for and makes you truly shine will remain with you always inside.

All around you are celebration and festivity, and you take your time to explore the party for a while, basking in the warm sun and drinking in the abundance that surrounds you. Eventually, though, you feel it is time to return the way you came, and you retrace your footsteps, climbing over the hill through the avenue of stones. As the stone rows come to an end, you feel yourself return to your body and the everyday world.

Let your breathing guide you back, slow and deep, feeling the breath in your chest, and the steady beating of your heart within you. Take your time. Feel yourself back into your body, back to the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving around.

Remember to ground yourself afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

A wild Lughnasadh ceremony

Lughnasadh is the perfect time to give thanks for the warmth of the sun, so that you can keep its power and light in the colder months to come.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Start by choosing a special site, somewhere that is practical for dancing and perhaps games but that also has a special atmosphere; somewhere that can be decorated, perhaps including a Lughnasadh altar, and will evoke the feel of the season.

Ask everyone to bring something that represents a special achievement of the past year. Take time to acknowledge and honour each other's gifts and progress in life, and ask Lugh and the earth goddess to bless each of these things in turn before placing them on the altar. You may also choose to raise some energy with dances emulating the waving corn in the fields, with some fast passionate music. Alternatively, you could hold group games, such as races or a tug of war.

A picnic or an outdoor feast is a great way to conclude your ceremony. Ask everyone to bring a contribution, ideally something they have grown or cooked themselves. You might want to meet beforehand to prepare some traditional boxty (see page 177), a seasonal stew, home-grown salads, as well as homemade lemonade (see page 178), and cakes and puddings made with fruit. Try fresh local foods, and anything that delights your senses and appetite.

Candles and flowers for a Lughnasadh ceremony

Celebrating alone

In the days leading up to the Lughnasadh, decorate your space with wildflowers and fruits, if you can, and the colours yellow, orange, red and gold. In readiness for your ceremony, you might like to prepare some smudge sticks (see page 169) to use later.

When you are ready to begin, create a sacred space by calling in the four directions (see page 14) and calling to any gods that you feel drawn to. Lugh and Tailtiu are the most relevant at this season, as well as the spirits of the animals and the plants that give us so much sustenance, so that you can give thanks for their gifts. Alternatively, you may wish to call upon your

ancestors to bless and support your life and path, or to help with anything that concerns you. Use your own heartfelt words to call upon them, as this is always more authentic and powerful, but you might say:

> *'I call upon the goddess Tailtiu, great one of the earth, goddess of the wild fruits and the harvest fields, come to me here on your sacred day. Bless me and let me feel your presence. Blessed be!*
>
> *'Lugh, lord of many skills, lord of justice and wisdom, I call you to our circle here on this sacred day, named in your honour. Come to us here, with your wisdom enlighten our hearts and minds, and bless us. So mote it be.'*

Here would be a good time to perform the stellar meditation (see page 167), or the honouring the earth goddess or Lughnasadh visualizations (see pages 164 and 180). At this point you might want to light a smudge stick to cleanse and bless your home (see page 169), or perform the three bees in a bag charm (see page 171). Afterwards, light a fire or candle and take a moment to gaze into the flames in silence, and focus on acknowledging the gifts of the season.

An important part of a Lughnasadh ceremony is to let yourself shine and feel proud of who you are. Try reading out a roll of your deeds (see page 179), listing all the things in your life that you can feel proud of and all your achievements, no matter how small or abstract.

Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Lughnasadh

In celebrating Lughnasadh we give ourselves time to focus on our pride and self-esteem, as well as on the good of our communities and the beauty of the natural world around us. Pride can be so healing and positive. As individuals, pride can spur us on to a more positive life and to make bolder and braver steps toward our potential. Having pride in our communities helps us grow closer together and see ourselves in a wider context, as well as relating more positively with our environment. Here we find ourselves in the thick of the summer celebrations, but we must remember, like Tailtiu, that these things come to an end, so we must drink them in while we can. Ahead still is the abundance of autumn, with the first of the falling leaves, so for now we must treasure every flower, every sunny day, as the gifts they are. Filling our hearts to the brim we may feel gratitude for our harvest as the wheel turns in due course.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER SIX
AUTUMN EQUINOX

AUTUMN EQUINOX – GRATITUDE

20–23 September (northern hemisphere)
20–23 March (southern hemisphere)

The second of the harvest festivals after Lughnasadh, at the Autumn Equinox day and night are of equal length – and light and dark are held in balance. Then the weather begins to grow colder and the days shorter, giving way to longer nights until the Winter Solstice. During the Autumn and Spring Equinoxes, the sun rises and sets at the midpoint between its furthest northern and southern positions, marking a seasonal shift between these two extremes. The Celts, skilled astronomical observers, noticed these points in the solar year as times of change, tidal shifts in the productivity of the earth herself, which were of great spiritual as well as practical significance. In the northern hemisphere, the Autumn Equinox takes place on a day between 20–23 September; in the southern hemisphere it falls between 20–23 March.

Key Themes

Equinox
balance
equal nights and days

Celebrating and honouring
darkness and lightness
taking stock
gathering in
preparing resources
gratitude
fruition

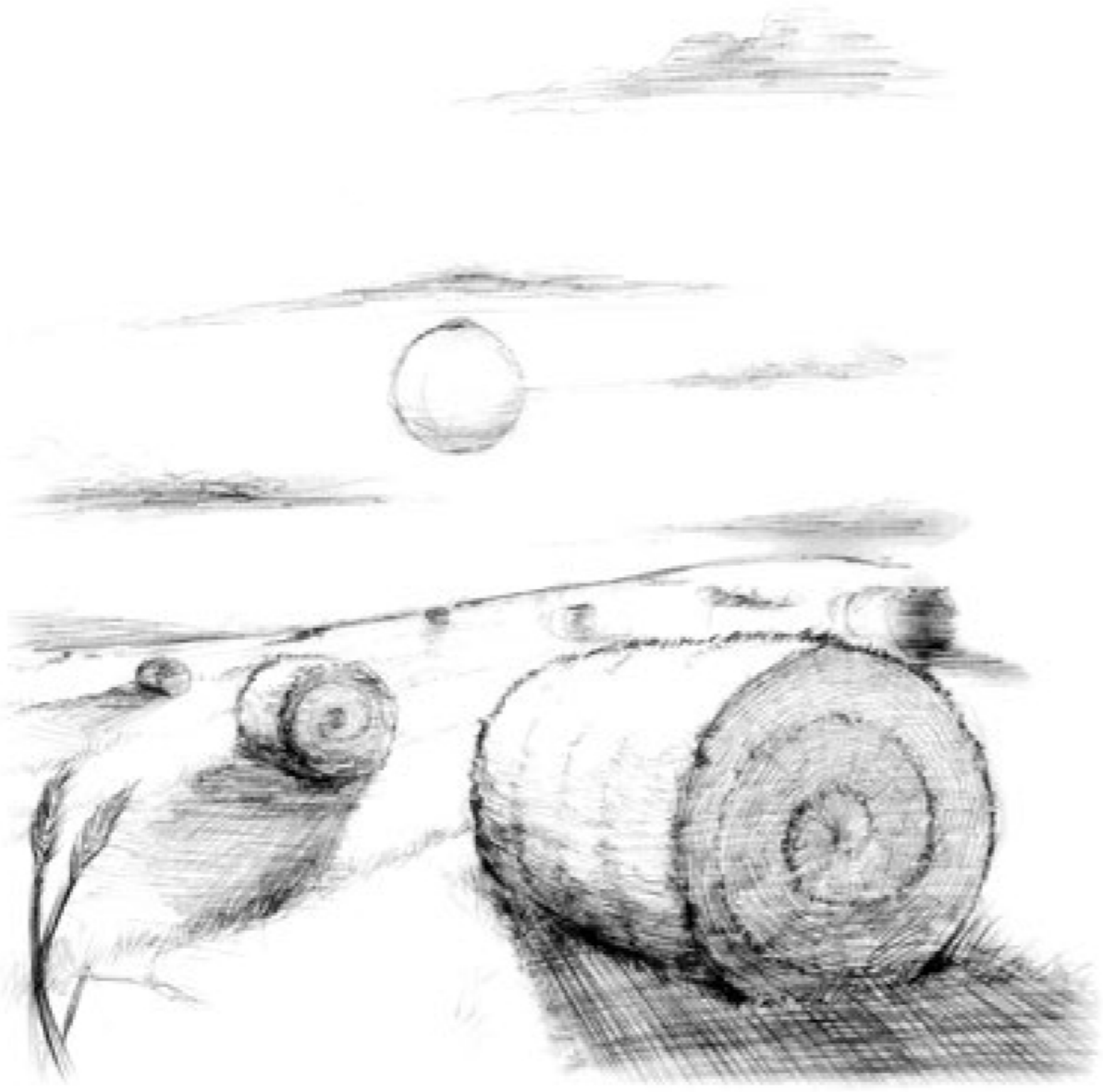
completion
contentment
fulfilment
harvest of the soul

As the summer draws to a close, its last days are filled with a special brilliance and abundance, unparalleled throughout the year. There is a mellow quality to the light, as the sun is lower upon the horizon. Life is now at its most abundant; the work of the spring and summer is coming to completion. The Autumn Equinox is a time of fruitfulness, with the turning leaves painting the forest in fiery tones, the smell of wood smoke upon the first cold winds and the scent of ripe apples in the orchards.

Now is the time to reap the rewards of our year and consider our own harvest. Have our activities produced the results we desired? Now we take stock, learn from our mistakes and preserve our resources for the winter ahead. This might be anything from storing harvested fruit and filling up the wood store to making sure we've had enough days out in the sunshine to cheer us through the grey winter months, and put sufficient money in the bank to pay the cold-weather fuel bills.

Known as Alban Elfed, 'the light of the water', to the Druids, the Autumn Equinox is a time of completion, when projects begun at the time of promise, the Spring Equinox, come into fruition. This can be seen in the fruit in the orchard and the berries on the bramble, and in our lives where the plans of spring and the busyness of summer have, hopefully, also led to the harvest. This is the time to draw inward once again to the comforts of the hearth and prepare for the dreaming season of winter ahead. On the wheel of the year, the Autumn Equinox, related to the element of water, is in the west, the position of old age, the setting sun and the gateway to the otherworld.

Another, modern name for the Autumn Equinox is 'The Feast of Avalon', referring to the sacredness of the apple at this time and also to Avalon, the magical island associated with Arthurian legend that is the gateway to the Celtic otherworld, the land of the dead. In this way we can see how the lore of the autumn and harvest festivals of Lughnasadh and the equinox gently give way to the great festival of Samhain, or Halloween.



Harvest time in the fields

Autumn Equinox around the world

There are many sacred sites around the world aligned to the equinoctial sunrise or sunset. One of the most famous is found at Loughcrew in Ireland, a complex of Neolithic stone structures also known as Sliabh na Callighe or ‘hills of the veiled one’ (Calliaghe or Cailleach being a Gaelic term for an old woman or magical hag, an ancient goddess). At the equinoxes, the rising sun penetrates the passage tomb known as Cairn T, illuminating the elaborate stone carvings within. Loughcrew is over 5,000 years old, and

may have been a place of equinoctial pilgrimage for much of that time, as it was used well into the Celtic Iron Age. It is now regularly visited and honoured by Irish pagans and Druids, their ascent up the hill to its summit perhaps following the same path their ancestors took so long ago.

On the Utah–Colorado border is Hovenweep Castle, built *c.* 1200 by the Anasazi people. In one room of the western tower, two doors are aligned with the position on the horizon of the setting sun at the equinoxes, allowing a beam of light to penetrate the heart of the structure. At Chichén Itzá in Mexico, there's an even more spectacular effect at sunset on the equinoxes, when a beam of sunlight snakes down the northern staircase of the pyramid of Kukulkan, as if the great serpent god Kukulkan himself were descending.

The Cailleach and the kern baby

In Celtic Scotland the Autumn Equinox celebrations were joyous occasions, accompanied by feasts and dancing. These practices later merged with the Christian celebration of Michaelmas on 29 September (see page 195), but traces of their pagan origins remained in a ritualized dance known as Cailleach an Dudain ('hag of the mill dust'), which played out the mysteries of the turning of the seasons and the way Mother Earth lies dormant in winter and rises again in spring. Pagan beliefs were also evident in some areas in the bringing in of the last sheaves of harvest, where the corn spirit was thought to take refuge. To cut them was to slay the spirit, so it became tradition to bind the last sheaf and make a ritual of reaping it.

This magical last sheaf was known in different parts of Britain as the 'mare', 'neck' or 'kern baby'; in the Highlands it was called the 'maiden' and was often harvested by the children. It was then woven into a corn fetish, a crude straw figure that was placed above the hearth until the following year when its pieces were scattered in the fields, imbuing the crop with the corn spirit once more. In the Hebrides the last sheaf was known as the Cailleach ('the hag', see also page 228) and great care was taken not to take the last farm reaping, 'lest the Cailleach stay with you all winter'. In South Wales this harvesting tradition was called Y Gaseg Fedi ('harvest mare') and the last sheaf of corn was thought to convey luck and fertility for the coming year. It was reaped in a sickle-throwing competition, the

winner being the one to take it home. Great fights to take the sheaf from the victor would sometimes ensue, so the luck could go to another house.

The last sheaf was often bound into a female form and its various names mentioned above hint at this being a forgotten Celtic grain goddess, now lost to antiquity. The mare is a totem animal in the British Isles and Ireland, a symbol of the goddess of the land, and of sovereignty, while 'Cailleach' and 'maiden' are also reminiscent of ancient goddess forms. In Somerset these fetishes were called the 'harvest queen', a figure who seems to have been embodied in harvest festivities across the British Isles in various forms, including by women in costume. The tradition of making corn dollies (see page 205) is a more modern development of this practice, and one demanding great skill.

The Dance of the Deermen

The Abbots Bromley Horn Dance takes place in Staffordshire in early September. These days it begins with a church service, after which the six 'deermen' collect their horns – reindeer antlers preserved in the town since the 11th century (although they are thought to have replaced far older ones) – and perform a ritualized dance in various locations in the village and its surroundings. This dance may well be a surviving thread of ancient fertility magic, to ensure good luck on the hunt in the coming winter. The six antlered dancers are accompanied by six others, including Maid Marian, perhaps once a goddess figure, and the famous Hobby Horse (see page 98), another ancient figure thought to be a harbinger of fertility magic, bringing in the change of season. The ancient revels hark back to a time when the blessing of the spirits of the forest and the hunt was required, now that summer was at an end and winter was on the horizon.

Michaelmas rituals

Much of the sacred flavour and pagan ritual of early harvest and Autumn Equinox celebrations seems to have been transplanted to the Hebridean feast of Michaelmas, held on 29 September. St Michael is the patron saint of the sea, something central to any islander's survival. On Michaelmas Eve

the women, often the eldest daughter, would bake a special bread called a struan (see page 210). In the morning everyone gathered for a church service followed by a great meal and procession sunwise or deiseil (clockwise) around the church, with hymns and songs, in honour of those lost at sea. In some places the struan would be eaten, while in others it would be hidden for the children to find – such activities are likely to be remnants of yet older traditions of leaving offerings to the spirits or 'the little people', for their blessing and continued goodwill.

Making an offering to the spirits of the land

The practice of making offerings to the spirits of the earth, crops or sea, as a way of thanking and honouring them at this time of autumnal abundance, is both ancient and widespread, and can be a way of deepening our connection to the landscape and its inherent consciousness, and feeling gratitude for our own blessings.

Choose a day around the equinox and prepare a small cake, perhaps a traditional struan or a bird seedcake. Make sure that your offering is biodegradable and can be eaten safely by the wild animals in your area.

Find a suitable spot, such as a tree in your garden or a local park, and place your offering on the ground. In your own words, say thank you to all the forms of life that dwell there. You could say something like this:

> *'Spirits of this garden, spirits of bird and badger, fox and mouse, faerie spirits, spirits of wind and rain, of river and soil, thank you, for all your gifts, for all that you are, in making this blessed earth.'*

Perhaps follow this up by making a gift to a food bank or some other charitable donation to a local cause.

Avalloc and the Isle of Avalon

Avalon, the otherworldly Isle of Apples of Arthurian legend, is a place of healing and respite, where the seeker finds wholeness and communion with

the Divine. The apple in the Celtic tradition is a tree of healing and wholeness, not only in a physical sense but also in a spiritual one, as this tree is associated with the soul. In many ways the symbol of the apple can be seen as interchangeable with that of the grail and the cauldron (standing for the womb and the goddess). In the Celtic mind, healing comes not through asceticism but rather through the regeneration of our physical senses and our acceptance of our nature; through complete immersion in the present and the human experience; through the sensuality and eroticism of nature and our place within it. Thus the apple also signifies pleasure, sexuality, knowledge, abundance and generosity. Wholeness in this sense sees no division between spirit and physicality, between the individual and the collective, between the present and the infinite. And so Avalon offers unconditional love and healing to those who reach its shore. Like the grail and images of heaven, the apple and the Isle of Avalon signify the completion of the soul's journey into awareness of itself, into this sense of wholeness. It is no surprise, therefore, that the apple became a symbol for sin in later cultures, which focused on empowering forces outside oneself rather than on knowledge of the divine within.

According to legend, the Isle of Avalon was ruled over by Avalloc, or Afallach, also named after the apple. Now largely forgotten, Avalloc, an early Green Man, is a god of healing and sensual reward. He is later remembered as the Arthurian Sir Evelake.

Meeting Avalloc: Considering wholeness

The Feast of Avalon is another name for the Autumn Equinox. This time of harvest serves as an opportunity to consider the nourishment that your body and soul needs for its wellbeing, for the restoration of balance in your life and psyche.

Begin by sitting comfortably and closing your eyes. Take some time to let the activities of the day fall away and your body slow down into the present moment before taking three deep breaths.

Imagine that you are walking through an apple orchard on a bright autumn day. Rays of mellow sunlight filter through the leaves. The grass at your feet is long and golden green, and the apples ripening on the trees are rich

and full. Some have already fallen to the grass, a feast for the birds and wildlife all around.

Wander slowly through the trees, focusing your attention on your feet firm upon the grass and earth, one foot after another, taking your time to gaze around and look at the trees. Listen to the birdsong and the gentle wind blowing through the slowly turning leaves.

Ahead you see a man, dressed in green and brown, attending to the trees. He is halfway up a ladder, resting against a trunk and partly hidden by the branches and leaves surrounding him. At the ladder's feet are baskets of apples. As you approach he climbs down the ladder and waves to you in greeting. You see that his face is ageless, but with deep lines around his eyes and mouth. He has a broad smile, and firm, waxy, ruddy cheeks like a ripe apple.

Greet him respectfully and see what he says to you. His words are the first you imagine him saying. He reaches out and offers you an apple. You take it and give thanks for his gift, before turning your attention to it.

What is the apple like? Feel it in your hands; is it smooth and firm, soft or rough? What colour is it? What is the texture of its skin, how does it smell? How do you think it will taste? You take a bite. Is it sweet or is it dry? Is it ripe and ready?

This is your wholeness. This is your harvest at this time. What does it teach you? Does it bring you nourishment?

When you look up, the orchard keeper has gone, but his gift to you remains. You now do as you choose with the apple: eat it, discard it, plant it or take it and all it represents with you.

Avalloc, god of healing and sensual renewal

Retrace your steps through the orchard and find yourself back in your body, in the present time. When you are ready, open your eyes but remain seated. Take some time to consider the orchard keeper's words, the apple that is

your harvest and all it represents to you at this point in your life; and all it makes you feel inside emotionally, as well as with your logical mind. You may wish to make some notes in a journal about this exercise, to help your deeper exploration of its themes and their relevance to your soul's journey.

Celtic starlore at Autumn Equinox

At this time of year the darkening nights gradually make the stars appear brighter and brighter in the velvet sky. Some summer stars are fading from sight now and the winter stars begin to rise upon the horizon. In the northern hemisphere, Arcturus, the guardian of the Great Bear goddess in stellar form, has set and Ursa Major is sinking ever lower into the northern horizon. From late August, Orion the Hunter (associated with Gwyn in Wales and Herne in English folklore) begins to rise again in the north a short time before sunrise; he will stride across the sky during the long winter nights.

The great harbinger of autumn in the northern skies is a group of tiny blue-white stars, the Pleiades, also known as the Seven Sisters. The Pleiades rise in the eastern sky during the autumn evenings of September and October, and several Neolithic monuments across Britain and Ireland, such as Avebury and Callanish, appear to contain alignments to their rising or have features intentionally designed to mark them in some way, suggesting Autumn Equinox ceremonies going back thousands of years.

In Greek myth the Pleiades are sisters who are being pursued across the sky by Orion the Hunter, and it may be that these stars were associated with a similar myth, now forgotten, in the Celtic lands. Hunters like Orion, or Gwyn in Welsh folklore, are mythical guardians of Annwn, the underworld. According to the Welsh poem 'Preiddeu Annwfn' ('The Spoils of Annwn') by the bard-god Taliesin, in the heart of Annwn there is a magical cauldron, which signifies the great womb of the goddess of the land, attended by nine maiden priestesses. The seven sisters of the Pleiades are associated in Celtic lore with mourning and are held to be another version of these priestesses, attending to the descent of the goddess deep into the earth during the winter, and pursued by the hunter god who both guards and desires them. By honouring this time of descent and decrease like these priestesses, we can come into closer union with nature's rhythm,

and find compassion for our own rhythm and inner life at this time as the fertility of the earth fades away.

Autumn Equinox stellar meditation: Honouring the fall of summer

In this meditation you can honour the descent and surrender of the earth goddess at this time, and discover the season's resonance in your own soul's journey as you prepare to give yourself to the winter ahead.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes gently relax behind your closed lids, and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are walking on a soft earthen path, along the ridge of a high, narrow hill. It is dusk. On either side there is an open expanse of sky – to your left the sun is setting and the sky is brilliant with golden, peachy light, darkening to purples and blues to your right where the stars are beginning to rise.

The ridge becomes narrower and narrower until there is only the path itself, just wide enough for you to walk along. Ahead of you the summit opens up to the sky and glimmers with silver light. The hillside drops away all around, deep green in the gathering dusk.

As you approach, you hear a faint choral singing, the wavering tones of female voices upon the wind. And as your draw nearer you see seven women ranged around the summit. They are impossibly tall, and seem to shimmer and f licker with f lashes of silver light. You draw nearer still and you see they surround an eighth woman, lying upon the ground. She is wrapped in a mantle of earth and leaves and green grasses, and her eyes are closed. As you look upon her you feel a deep grief.

Each of the women flickers in your vision and grows taller still, as though they have become silver flames. Each carries something: one holds an apple; another, a sheaf of wheat; a third, a baby of golden light; the fourth, a chalice; another holds a great lit candle; another a sickle; and the seventh holds a wheel. These are the seven sisters, priestesses of the earth goddess. As you study the things they hold, they imprint themselves on your inner vision, although their meaning may be a mystery. You know that these sisters are beings of great power and wisdom.

Finally, you turn you attention to the woman upon the ground. Like them, she is tall and beautiful, but she lies so still. She breathes deeply and slowly, a smile upon her face. ‘She is sleeping,’ says one of the sisters, ‘but she will wake again in time.’

You turn to look at the sister who has spoken. She is the one with the apple in her hand, which she raises up to catch the last rays of the summer sun, lighting up the sky in all its glory behind her. ‘The wheel turns,’ says another sister, the one who stands furthest from the sunset. You turn to look at her and see that behind her night has gathered, and the sky is studded with stars.

Stand here for a while, at this ancient sacred place between the dark and the light, between winter and summer. The sisters fall silent and a soft wind blows. Breathe deeply and feel this place of balance within you: the light of summer on one side, the coming winter upon the other. As you breathe and feel the still pivotal point within you, you see the sun has set. The night is brilliant with stars and wonder. The seven sisters have gone and the woman upon the ground has vanished, a mound of earth in her place. Deep in your heart you know she will return when spring is once more upon the horizon.

When you are ready, return the way you came, the starlit sky all around you. As you come to the bottom of the hill, feel yourself slip back into your body, into the present time. Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always, before wriggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes as you return to the everyday world. You may need to ground yourself carefully after this exercise by eating and drinking and taking your time to feel yourself back in your body.

Garden magic at Autumn Equinox

This is the best time of year to plant spring-flowering bulbs. Nuts, too, can be gathered, dried and used as talismans for health, wisdom and empowerment, as well as planted fresh for spell work, their growth in the spring carrying your intentions into life. Try using verbal or written spells as you plant, asking for anything you want to come to you in the spring. Whether it is fertility, love, money, luck or healing that you yearn for, your

desire shall become manifest as the first green shoots break the surface of the soil.

Spring-flowering bulb spell

Use this spell to draw what you need toward you over the coming year. It can be performed using any spring-flowering bulb, which you plant in a pot or any suitable patch in your garden. As the bulb grows green shoots and then flowers, so the new things you have called into your life will begin to appear.

Before you start, take a few moments, or even hours, to look over your life and decide what you need to change, what you need to draw to you for greater balance and wholeness. This might be better health, the ability to earn more money, more friendships or romance. You can also ask for more abstract things that nonetheless are essential for your wellbeing, such as patience, self-esteem, tenacity and so on.

Write down what you wish to manifest on a small slip of paper. Now pick up the bulb and take three deep breaths. Visualize what you wish to bring into your life, what you want to grow. With each breath let this image become stronger and clearer. Still holding the bulb, imagine that, just like a plant, you can draw up energy and nutrients from the soil. With every in-breath draw this energy and goodness up through the ground and into your body, and with every out-breath send this energy into the bulb. From time to time, restate in your mind's eye what you want to bring to you, and imagine that this intention is also sent into the bulb, until it glows with energy.

Place the paper in the soil, making sure it won't inhibit the bulb's root growth as it decomposes, and plant the bulb on top. If necessary, wrap the paper around the bulb like a collar before planting. Cover with soil and pat it down firmly, before watering gently. Finally, place your hands upon the soil for a moment and thank the bulb for your life to come.

Acorn or hazelnut spell

Acorns, the seeds of the oak tree, have long been associated with good luck and are powerful, magical talismans. Keep one in your purse or wallet and whisper to it from time to time, asking it to bring you prosperity. Alternatively, hold one in your hands and ask the spirit of the oak to assist you with your desire, and then plant it in good rich soil. You can also draw tiny symbols on acorns, such as a heart for love, or a simple dove outline for peace, to encourage those things to come into your life in more abundance.

The same spell can be used with hazelnuts, which are especially good at attracting wisdom and inspiration to help you find new ways to deal with problems or achieve your goals, or when filling out forms or writing important letters. Again, inscribe symbols upon them according to your desires and carry them with you in a small pouch.

You can plant an acorn or a hazelnut with prayers to draw in what you seek as it starts to grow into a tree. Say these words, or use your own, as you hold the acorn or hazelnut in your hands:

> *'Spirit of the acorn [*or *hazelnut], I ask a boon of you. Grant me prosperity, and resources, just as all that you need is within you, make my life full of all I need so that I, too, may grow strong and tall! Blessed be!'*

Autumn Equinox crafts

In the Celtic calendar, this is a time of balance, when the wheel of the seasons pauses briefly in a moment of completion and fullness before tipping toward the decay of winter. Making use of nature's abundance in seasonal crafts can really add a special magic to this festival.

Corn dolly – the kern baby

There are several different traditional designs of corn dolly to choose from, many demanding great skill to make. They do not usually look like humanized dolls, but are rather a loop of woven corn (wheat) with a plaited tubular 'body' culminating in the corn ears at the bottom. They can then be

covered with ribbons and clothes, or left plain. The simplest kind of doll or kern baby to make, known as the ‘lovers’ knot’, is also used as a love token.

You will need

- *4 long stalks of corn*
- *Pale-coloured embroidery thread*
- *Ribbon*

Soak the stalks in hot water until pliable, then dry them. Tie them in a bunch with thread, just above the ears. Separate the stalks into a cross configuration so you can see what you are doing, and number them 1–4, perhaps by marking them with a small, removable sticky label.

Begin the weaving by bending straw 3 over to straw 1. Then bend straw 1 over to the position of straw 3. Bend straw 2 over to straw 4, and straw 4 over to where straw 2 was. Continue in order, crossing opposite straws, until you reach the required length. Tie the free ends of the straws with thread and fasten in a loop above the ears of corn with a ribbon. Trim off any stray ends neatly and remove the number stickers.

Autumn wall hanging

Autumn leaves can be used to make wall hangings, to decorate your home as part of your equinox celebrations and to act as a reminder of this time of abundance and balance. Before starting work you might want to preserve the colour and flexibility of the leaves by gently painting them with melted beeswax or paraffin. Your creations might explore the themes of harvest and thanksgiving, or you could create a picture of Avalloc, as an offering to him. As well as leaves, you can use twigs, seedheads, pieces of coloured cloth and other items, glued or sewn into place. Don’t worry about getting everything just so. A picture that is less than perfect often has the most spirit presence about it. Try to work out a simple design first, before you attach any leaves, for the best effects. Children will also enjoy making leaf pictures.

Autumn leaf mask

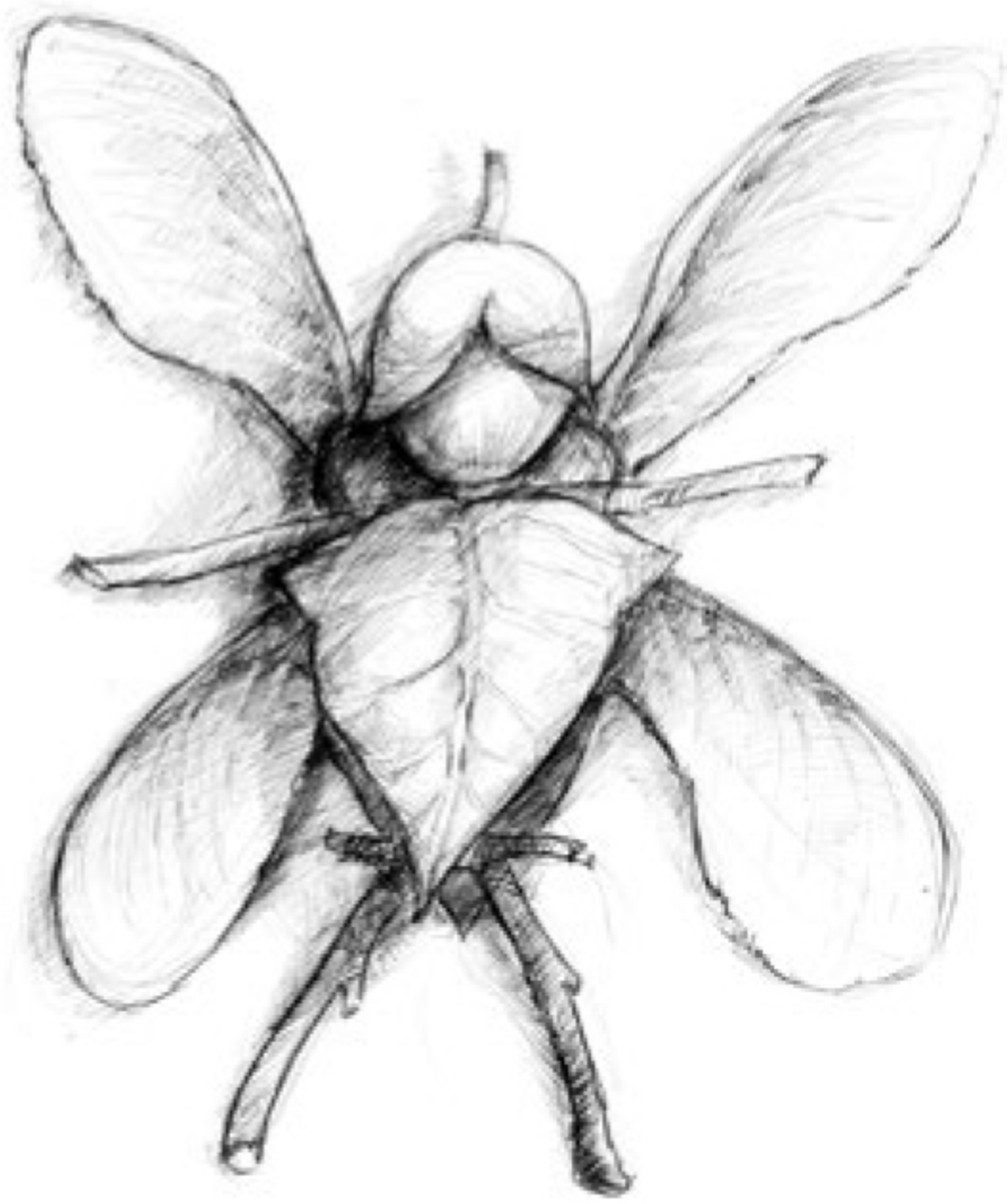
In autumn and winter the themes of letting go, sacrifice and transformation are important. Wearing a leaf mask at a seasonal celebration is a way of exploring these ideas, surrendering ourselves to the natural processes of decay and regeneration. Leaf masks are easy to make, with any imperfections only making them more wild and expressive! As you work, you may like to invoke the spirits of the forest, or Avalloc or an earth goddess, so that your mask embodies something of their wild and free nature.

You can buy a ready-made mask or make the backing yourself from a piece of card and some elastic. Alternatively, use a piece of thick card, cut eye holes and attach a small stick to one side so that you can hold it in front of your face. Cover your mask with autumn leaves and seedheads, arranging them first before gluing into place.

Leaf spirit dolls

You may like to make dolls to represent nature spirits and faeries as a means of expressing your gratitude for the magical way in which your personal harvest has once again been brought to fruition. Perhaps you could use them as decorations on a celebratory autumn-themed altar (see page 208). Try using suitably shaped twigs and leaves, as well as seedheads, nuts, berries or beads. Scraps of cloth or painted leaves could make clothes, and wings and a tail can also be added with leaves, twigs or ivy. You may need twine, thread and glue.

Allow your creativity free reign – the dolls don’t have to be perfect, the important thing is enjoying making them. This is in any case the best way to imbue them with magic and energy, so give yourself free reign.



A leaf spirit doll

An Autumn Equinox altar

The Autumn Equinox is the second of the harvest festivals, a time to honour the change of season, so decorations of orange, red, brown and green are suitable. Coloured candles and altar cloths can be lovely, while natural decorations of seedpods, nuts, pine cones, autumn leaves and berries make evocative and sensual additions to focus on when contemplating gratitude

for nature's abundance and the turning of the Wheel of the Year. You may also wish to include antlers, sun wheels and oak leaves to honour the lord of the hunt and the spirits of animals and trees that are preparing now for the winter ahead.

Kitchen witchery at Autumn Equinox

The harvests of the Autumn Equinox are an auspicious time for feasting and revelling in the delight of our appetites, as well as for bringing a more sacred way of being into our lives. One way to become more spiritually conscious is to be more aware of what we eat.

Edible apple garlands

Easy to make, these lovely decorations celebrate the harvest and will spread gratitude, contentment and fulfilment through your home along with their delicious autumnal scent. They also taste wonderful.

You will need

- *6 large eating apples, cored and thinly sliced horizontally*
- *6 lemons, juiced*
- *Ground cinnamon to taste (optional)*
- *Grating of nutmeg (optional)*
- *Embroidery thread*
- *Florist's wire*
- *Handful of cinnamon sticks, cranberries, rowanberries and clean (washed) autumn leaves*
- *Ribbon*

Place the apple slices in a large bowl. Cover with the lemon juice and leave to soak for about 10 minutes. Drain the apple slices and gently pat them dry with paper towel. When they are completely dry, dust them with cinnamon and a little nutmeg, if using.

String the apple slices onto a long piece of embroidery thread or florist's wire, and hang them in a bright window to dry for at least a week. To dry

the apple rings more quickly, place without overlapping on a baking sheet, and bake on a low heat (150°C/300°F/gas mark 2) for a couple of hours. Check them regularly so they don't burn and adjust the temperature and cooking time accordingly. Baked dried apples are crisper than those dried by air.

Using some florist's wire, string the apples together with the cinnamon sticks. Then add some colourful leaves and berries – cranberries and rowanberries work well. Remember to add a loop to each end of your garland, so that you can hang it up and finish it off with a ribbon bow. The apples will last for a few weeks if kept dry.

Celtic harvest bread: Struan

This traditional recipe makes about 2.25kg (5lb) of dough, which is enough for three loaves of 450–650g (1–1½lb) each. After you have baked your loaves you may wish to make them part of your harvest-time celebrations and bless them before eating. In the Hebrides, struan bread was made using the different grains that had been gathered in the harvest; as you bake you are therefore celebrating all your achievements over the preceding months.

You will need

- *900g/2lb/6½ cups high-gluten or strong bread flour*
- *110g/3¾oz/¾ cup polenta (uncooked weight)*
- *110g/3¾oz/1 cup rolled oats*
- *60g/2oz/½ cup wheat bran*
- *75g/2½oz/⅓ cup brown sugar*
- *3 tsp sea salt, freshly ground*
- *3 tbsp instant yeast*
- *180ml/6fl oz/¾ cup buttermilk*
- *240–360ml/8–12fl oz/1–1½ cups warm water*
- *175g/6oz/½ cup honey*
- *110g/3¾oz/½ cup cooked brown rice*
- *1 egg*
- *1 tbsp poppy seeds (for decorating)*

Mix 300g/10½oz/2 cups of the flour with the rest of the dry ingredients in a large bowl. Then add the buttermilk, water, honey and cooked rice, and mix it all together. Add the rest of the flour, a little at a time, and knead the dough until it becomes lighter in colour and the grains look evenly distributed (approximately 15 minutes by hand – less in a machine.) It should be pale golden, stretchy and 'tacky' still, but should not crumble or flake.

Leave the dough to rise by placing it in a clean bowl, covered with a damp cloth, somewhere warm for about 1 hour. When the dough has doubled in size, remove it from the bowl and divide it into three pieces. Roll each piece into a loaf.

Place each loaf into a greased 23 × 11.5cm (9 × 4½in) bread tin. Brush the top of the loaf with an egg-wash and sprinkle with poppy seeds.

Again cover and allow the dough to rise further until it reaches the top of the tin, and then bake in a preheated oven (350°F/180°C/gas mark 4) until the loaf has domed nicely and is dark gold, approximately 45 minutes. The fully baked loaf should be a uniform colour and sound hollow when tapped. Allow the bread to cool thoroughly for at least 45 minutes before slicing it.

Blessing the struan

You might also wish to bless your bread in the traditional Celtic way. The following blessing comes from the Outer Hebrides and is recorded in Alexander Carmichael's *The Carmina Gadelica* (see page 25). It reflects the Christian beliefs of the time but is much older and has evolved through the oral tradition of the culture. Feel free to adapt it and include the gods and goddesses of the sun, or the spirits of the land, or any others that you choose. The blessing suggests sprinkling holy water onto the bread, but you can use fresh spring water, and sprinkle the water and crumbs onto children or the land, to send them blessings and protection.

> *'Each meal beneath my roof, they will all be mixed together, in the name of God the Son who gave them growth.*
>
> *Milk, and eggs, and butter, the good produce of our own flock, there shall be no dearth in our land, nor in our dwelling.*

Consecrate the produce of our land, bestow prosperity and peace, in the name of the Father the King and of the three beloved apostles.

I will put water on them all in the precious name of the Son of God, in the name of Mary the generous, and of Patrick.

When we shall sit down to take our food

I will sprinkle some in the name of God on the children.'

Sloe gin

This is the time to gather sloes – the berries of the blackthorn – and make a festive drink for the coming winter, perhaps to share with friends as you discuss your achievements of the year and plans for transformations to come in your life. Make sure you identify your sloes correctly, checking the leaves and the thorns, as well as the smooth black berries against images in a book or online if in any doubt. Sloe gin takes time to mature, so it is best to make a batch for the Winter Solstice or keep it until the Autumn Equinox the following year.

You will need

- *450g/1lb/3½ cups sloe berries*
- *225g/8oz/1 cup sugar*
- *1 litre/35 fl oz/4 cups gin*
- *Sterilized bottle with airtight lid*
- *Muslin cloth*

Wash the sloes and prick their tough skins all over before placing them in a sterilized glass bottle.

Mix the sugar and gin together then pour over the berries. Seal the jar with an airtight lid. Store in a dark cupboard and shake every day for about a week, then once a week for at least two months.

Finally, strain through a muslin cloth to remove the berries and store in a freshly sterilized bottle.

Harvest of the soul

An important element of the Autumn Equinox celebrations is becoming conscious of, and giving thanks for, the harvests in our own lives. The old adage ‘we reap what we sow’ is very true, as our attitudes and actions throughout the year have consequences that shape our lives, from the emotional and spiritual to the physical and material. Becoming as conscious as possible and focusing on gratitude helps us to maximize the positive and minimize the negative effects of our behaviour.

To do this we need to stop and take stock, and let our images of ourselves fall away so that we can see ourselves and acknowledge what our lives are really like and why. This can be hard, so it’s important to focus on the good as much as possible, to honour and to feel grateful for all the blessings, support and signs of positivity that have affected our life’s journey. This is not about ignoring the negative, but it does mean treating ourselves, as well as those around us, with compassion when times are hard or when we’ve made mistakes and placing our attention on all that has gone well in our lives as well as on those things beyond our personal stories that lend beauty or wonder to our days. In this way we can feel good for everything positive we experience as well as for those times when we have been patient with ourselves, and have endured or persisted when tackling a problem, rather than placing our energy on the problems and wounds themselves.

By strengthening the positive, by nurturing what is healthy, we grow a greater harvest within ourselves year on year. This is rather like an emotional form of organic gardening – we need not poison the ‘weeds’, only nurture healthy growth where we want it to be, so that the weeds have less and less opportunity to overrun our lives.

An Autumn Equinox visualization

In this guided visualization we explore the mysteries of the harvest and the themes of the season, encountering the spirit of the grain to contemplate the cycles of our own lives through the years.

See yourself walking along a dusty country lane, in the golden light of an early autumn afternoon. There are tall hedges on either side of you, bowing leafy branches full of hawthorn and sloe berries. The air is warm. There are

others – men, women and children – all making their way along the path ahead of you and behind you. Out of sight drums and flutes are making music, while the birds trill and call in the hedgerow, weaving in and out of the tune with their own wild song. There is an atmosphere of ease and wholesomeness all around.

Eventually the path turns and you enter an open field. A great many people are walking to and fro carrying tools and tying fat bundles of golden wheat. The earth is a rich brown where the crop has been reaped, with scattered chaff and straw providing a feast for hundreds of birds that dive and peck. They fly up in great clouds as the people approach, only to descend to their feast once more. Small children scurry around competing with the birds for the last of the fallen wheat stalks. At the edge of the field men and women are beginning to lay out a picnic, and you see that two old men sitting on beer barrels under an ancient elder tree are playing the music. You notice that one final stand of wheat is still to be reaped, at the far corner of the field.

As you gaze at the unreaped wheat, you sense a change in the atmosphere. The music dulls and quietens, seeming to become more distant. You notice that no one is looking at this final stand of wheat, and the children are avoiding it in their games. The very air in this lonely part of the field seems to buzz and hum, and your vision blurs as if a heat haze were making ripples in the air.

A soft wind blows against your cheek and you hear a low voice murmur in your ear, ‘I am the golden one, the spirit of the grain, I rise and fall to rise again …’

A small group of men are approaching now, their sickles in their hands. Their voices are low as they acknowledge you and each other. They laugh sheepishly, their shoulders just a little tense, as they gather for the reaping game. They line up to cut the last of the grain, invoking the maiden and the Cailleach.

‘I am green in spring and golden in summer. Hide me in darkness, in the old woman’s lap and I will be reborn.’ There is a touch of fierceness now, in the strange voice in your ear, and you know that something ancient, something strong, something wild is here. Your heart beats a little faster, as though it

would break through your chest to meet this strange wild thing … and join its dance of life and death, rising and falling with the seasons.

The men take turns to throw their sickles, trying to reap the last sheaf from afar, as if they fear the spirit of the grain, their ancient friend, which gives so much year on year. As if they would not be the one to cut its final golden spears. Most of the throws are in vain: each man cuts only a stalk or two, leaving many for the next – one man after another. But the golden stand of wheat is getting thinner and thinner, until one last throw and all the golden wheat has fallen to the ground.

'Aaahhhh,' the wind blows again, a soft sigh that swirls around the dun brown field, and the men and women give a great shout. 'We have her! We have her!' In a rush they gather round and collect the last sheaf, tying her tight with a red ribbon. Suddenly, the music sparks up loud again, and the men and women hurry around the field, carrying the sheaf high over their heads. They take her to a woman who sits beneath the trees, dressed in red with a garland of flowers in her hair. She takes the precious bunch of golden wheat and binds flowers about its waist with her clever brown fingers, and wraps it in a shawl of white wool. Standing slowly, holding the sheaf like a babe in arms, she speaks softly to the crowd.

'The maid has fallen, the Cailleach has come … The maid will rise again.' And with that she turns her back and carries her bundle reverently home. All around the men and women dance and whirl around the field, feasting on loaves and jugs of ale, but you pause. You know in the magic of this moment that the wheel has turned. There is a sense of fullness, of completion. As you stand there, the brown earth under your feet, take a few breaths and acknowledge this time of harvest. There is no other like it.

Ahead, the winter is gathering; the old woman, the Cailleach, has come, and these last golden days of the year are precious. You raise your head to feel the sun upon your face, before returning the way you came, down the lane, your feet upon the dusty earth, your breath full in your chest, before letting yourself return to your body once more. Take your time. Feel yourself back in the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving about.

Remember to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

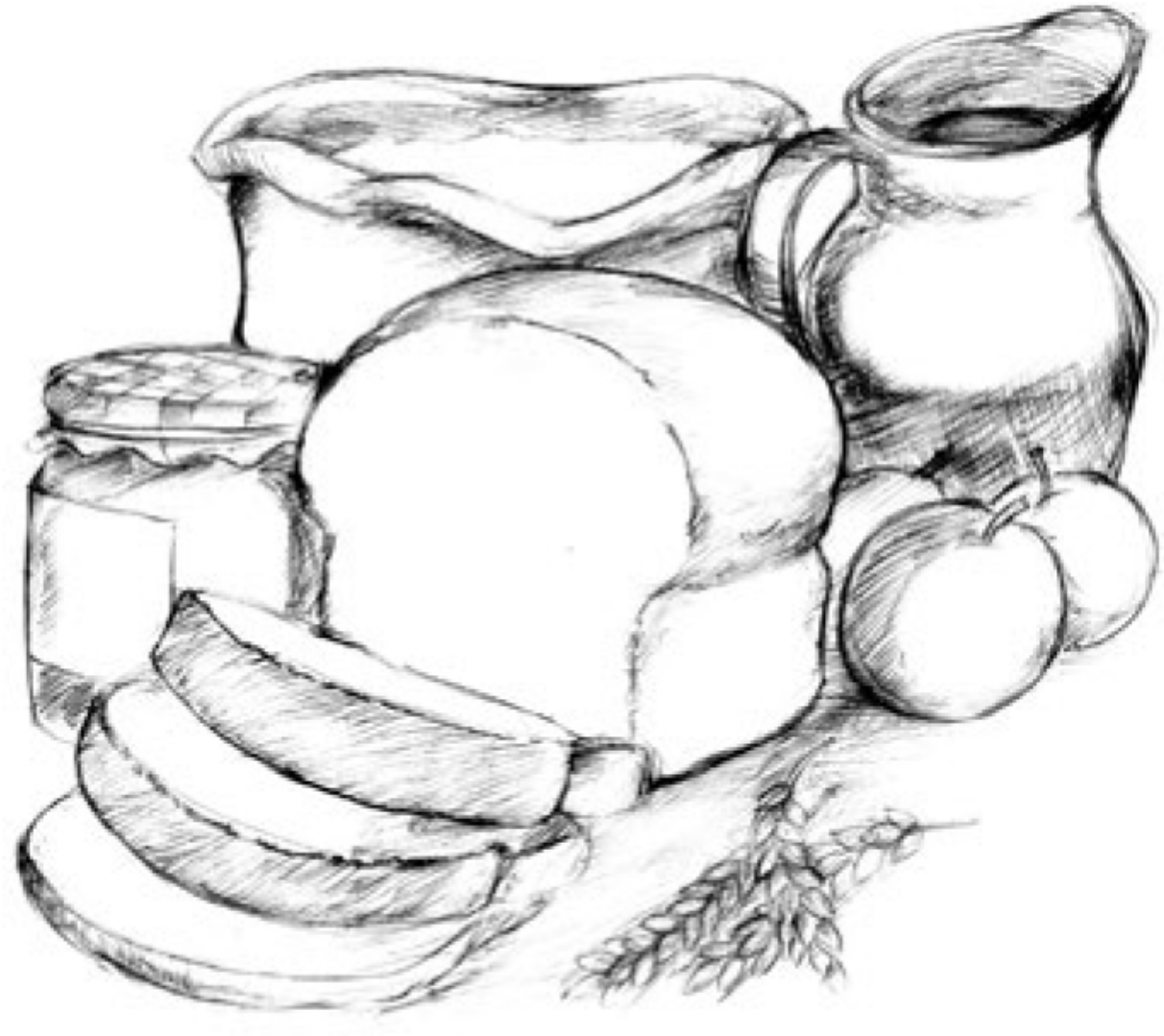
An Autumn Equinox fruition ceremony

While harvest festival traditions have waxed and waned over the years, the tradition of bringing in the harvest with a feast and a celebration has seen a revival in more recent times. By marking the harvest through a ceremony, we fulfil an ancient need that is common to us all (whether we work on the land or in an office) to appreciate the rewards of our work – our harvest.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Choose a space where everyone can gather comfortably, perhaps with a large table where you can enjoy a feast together. To add atmosphere add candles and sheaves of grain or corn dollies (see page 205), as well as with gold and brown cloths or leaf hangings (see page 206). You may also like to set up an Autumn Equinox altar, by decorating a table with seasonal items (see page 208), and place some offerings here during the ceremony, which can be donated to a local food bank or other charity afterwards. You might also wish to include bundles of wheat and bowls of berries and seeds, which can later be given to the birds and animals.

Then each person could take a turn announcing aloud all the things they are grateful for at this time, before placing a basket of food upon the altar, so a great array of abundance builds with each offering. Home-baked and blessed struan bread (see page 210) would make a perfect offering. When the ceremony is over, share a feast together of seasonally, home-baked dishes and produce while revelling in each other's stories of harvests past and present.



Autumn Equinox offerings

Celebrating alone

In the days leading up to the equinox, decorate your space with leaf dolls or corn dollies (see pages 207 and 205) and apple garlands (see page 209) and, as above, you may like to set up an altar where you can leave a few offerings. To begin your ceremony create a sacred space, by calling in the four directions (see page 14) and calling to any gods that you feel drawn to, such as the Seven Sisters, the earth goddess or Avalloc, as well as the spirits of the animals and the plants that give us so much sustenance, so that you can give thanks for their sacrifices. Alternatively, you may wish to call upon your ancestors to bless and support your life and path, or to help with anything that concerns you. Use your own heartfelt words to call upon your

chosen deities, as this is always more authentic and powerful, but you might say:

> *'Avalloc, lord of the orchards, ancient spirits of the corn and grain, please join us and bless us at this sacred time.'*

Now would be a good time to perform the stellar meditation or the meeting Avalloc or Autumn Equinox visualization (see pages 197 and 214), as well as either the spring-flowering bulb or the acorn or hazelnut spell (see pages 203 and 204). You may also want to light a candle or a fire. When it is lit, take a moment to gaze into the flames in silence. In your mind's eye, consider the balance between the light and the darkness in your life; the balance between how much you give and how much you receive. Consider where you need to bring balance and where the balance is shifting, giving way to decay and death so that new life may come in due course.

An important part of an equinox ceremony is to become more aware of the blessings in your life, and focus upon giving thanks. Try listing all the things in your life that you can feel gratitude for, and ask that the spirits of the harvest and the good earth bless each of these things in turn. Use your own words, as these will be the most heartfelt, but you could say something like:

> *'I give thanks for my relationship with* [insert name/names]*, and ask that all good spirits bless them and our time together!*
>
> *'I give thanks for my beautiful, warm, safe home, and ask that the spirits of the earth and land hereabouts bless this house, this home and all within it!'*

Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond

we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Autumn Equinox

In celebrating the Autumn Equinox we give ourselves time to focus on gratitude and open our hearts to the great abundance of the natural world around us. Gratitude is so empowering and healing: it helps us to create a conscious connection with each other and the universe and see our life's journey as an endless cycle of in-breath and out-breath, of giving and receiving. We can learn to have confidence in this eternal flow so that, when autumn turns to the death of the year at Samhain, we can embrace sacrifice and surrender with grace and trust, knowing that the tide will turn once again.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER SEVEN
SAMHAIN

SAMHAIN – GOING WITHIN

31 October (northern hemisphere)
1 May (southern hemisphere)

Samhain is a time of growing darkness. The days become short and evenings fade quickly into night. The last leaves fall, to rustle underfoot and dance in the first strong winds that herald the winter. Our ancestors believed that the day, the year and indeed all life begins with darkness and stillness. As the evenings draw in and the dark half of the year begins to have its influence in our daily lives, it is natural to begin a period of introspection, honouring all that has passed in the world over the previous year, in order to create a new beginning. Samhain ('summer's end'), the festival celebrated on 31 October (northern hemisphere) and on 1 May (southern hemisphere), is commonly considered to be Celtic New Year.

Key Themes

Cross quarter
death
surrender
stillness

Celebrating and honouring
darkness
the shadow
going within
endings and beginnings
crossing the veil
the spirit world
remembrance

grieving
ancestors
introspection
the unconscious

The indigenous spiritual traditions of this land always honoured the dead and all ancestral presences, not as beings to fear but as respected allies and councillors. As representatives of their people in the spirit realm, they act as go-betweens transmitting knowledge to and from the mortal world and back to the realm of spirit. At Samhain all fires were extinguished except for the bonfire (or 'bone-fire') built of the remains of livestock slaughtered in preparation for winter. Each family would take a torch from this fire to relight their home fires. Thus Samhain is a time of renewal when life retreats within the earth, within doors and within the psyche, to find completion and contemplation. It is the blank page upon which the coming year will be written.

This powerful turning point is when the old becomes young again. It is a time of ancestral connection, where those that have walked the mortal roads before us gather at the edges of perception, whispering in our ear to be remembered, testifying that the bonds of human relations stretch far from this world into the next. It is a time when all things lost may be found again, all things hidden become uncovered and all things clinging to life beyond their time finally surrender to the great cycles of creation, trusting that in death there is life anew. To our ancestors, endings merged into beginnings, and the first moments of life were also marked by silence, stillness and nourishing darkness within the womb. And so it is with Samhain; at the death of the year we find inception and the beginning of a new journey.

The spirit world

Since the emergence of Christianity in the British Isles, the festival of Samhain has become overlaid by the Christian festival of Halloween, or All Hallows Eve, also on 31 October, followed by All Saints Day on 1 November. Instead of a festival honouring the slaughter of livestock and the presence of the spirit world touching our own at this time, All Hallows Eve is concerned with demons and the unquiet dead rising to torment the living.

This has some elements in common with Samhain, as both are seen as a special ‘spirit night’, but rather than guiding the dead on to the next world, the emphasis here is on chaos and negative energies having free reign before they are hounded back to hell by the saints on the following day. There is also no sense of final harvest or of the cull, the slaughter of livestock fattened over the summer months, then prepared, preserved and stored to provide for the winter ahead, just as we can metaphorically cull or preserve things in our own lives at this time to restore our balance and to provide for our path ahead.

Halloween has become increasingly popular in the modern imagination, especially in the United States, the development of a positive spin on the ghosts and spirits of the night drawing on Samhain tradition more than many realize. While Samhain was a night feared by the Celts, it was also a time held in deep honour, with a reverence toward the spirits and the ancestral presences walking abroad at this time, even if relations with them were handled with great care.

Spirit nights in the Celtic world

In Wales, Samhain is known as Nos Calan Gaeaf. It is a spirit night, or Ysbridnos (see page 112). One of its many traditions is of a terrifying spirit in the form of a great, tail-less, black sow, known as Yr Hwrch Ddu Gwta, who wandered abroad seizing solitary travellers. Traditional Welsh divination at this time was to place stones inscribed with the names of each family member into the fire, and if one of the names was gone in the morning then that person was likely to die over the coming year.

In Ireland, Samhain night, or Oiche Shamna, was especially important, although the Neolithic passage tomb known as ‘The Mound of the Hostages’ in County Meath is aligned to the Samhain sunrise. Such ancient tombs were considered to be homes to the Sidhe, or the faeries, as well as to the spirits of the dead, which are said to roam freely at Samhain. Offerings are still made to the dead and the spirits of the land at this time so that they protect both the people and their livestock over the winter.

The Cailleach

In Celtic lands the winter months are under the rulership of the Cailleach, the old woman (or hag) of winter (see page 193). She is often described as herding deer, a sacred animal in the Celtic tradition, symbolizing nobility and pride, and providing sustenance over the winter. The deer is a symbol of the old hunter gods, guardians of the Celtic underworld, and also harks back to the ancient deer goddess, who went by many names and was once worshipped by Celtic tribes in Britain, Ireland and parts of Europe.

In Scotland the Cailleach is also known as the Cailleach Bheur, or the blue hag, and as the Cailleach Bheira (Vera, or the spiky one), the queen of winter, whose throne is the mountain Ben Nevis. On the west coast of Scotland, she is said to bring in the winter by washing her plaid (a kind of cloak) in the Gulf of Corryvreckan (in Gaelic Coire Bhreacain means 'the Cauldron of the Plaid'). Washing her plaid takes three days and nights, during which time a great storm roars across the land, and when she is done, the plaid is pure white and all the land is covered with snow. She also carries a great staff that she can strike upon the earth to bring frost and crack rocks. The Cailleach is associated with many places all over Scotland: in Argyll and Bute, for example, she is connected to the mountain Ben Cruachan, and is known as Cailleach nan Cruachan, meaning 'the witch of Cruachan'; and on Skye the mountain Beinn na Caillich is also named after her.

In Ireland, the Cailleach is also associated with mountains and rocky outcrops, and with the positioning of standing stones and cairns upon the landscape. Several places are named after her, such as Ceann Caillí, meaning 'the hag's head', on the southern tip of the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare; and the megalithic tombs of Loughcrew, in County Meath, are positioned atop Slieve na Calliagh, meaning 'the hag's mountain'. There is also a kerbstone at Loughcrew called 'the hag's chair'.

The Cailleach, queen of winter

A prayer to the Cailleach

The Cailleach can be called upon as an ancient ancestral mother, or as a powerful and wise goddess of the winter, to support you whenever you face hard times, feel lost or experience sadness or grief, as well as to honour and bless those who have passed over. She may sometimes be seen as the Celtic embodiment of death, but as such she needn't be a figure to be feared, rather a wise grandmother who guides the departed on their way when their time is come. To call upon her for aid, its best to use your own words, as these will be more powerful and heartfelt, but you could try these to get you started:

> *'I call upon the Cailleach, the old veiled one, into whose arms we will always return. Come to me as the wheel turns and reveal some of your wisdom. Let my ancestors know they are remembered. Bless me and those who have gone before. Let me feel your presence and wisdom. Blessed be!'*

The hunter gods: Herne, Cernunnos and Gwyn

Samhain, considered the beginning of winter, is also a time associated with the Celtic hunter gods, the European Cernunnos, as well as the English Herne the Hunter and the Welsh Gwyn ap Nudd. Hunter gods are another form of the 'wild man' (see page 200), a recurring figure in Celtic myth associated with wild animals as well as male fertility and prowess, from an era when the ability to hunt was essential for our winter survival. These gods also featured as tribal and territorial guardians of the Iron Age Celts, partners to the earth goddess in her various forms. In agricultural terms these deities oversee the cull or yearly slaughter of livestock in preparation for winter, with its corresponding magical and spiritual associations, and so they represent our courage to surrender to the nadir of our lives, our metaphorical, spiritual winters, spurring us into letting go of what no longer serves us, and to descend willingly into the underworld for dissolution and renewal. As territorial guardians and partners to the goddesses of the land, they oversee a period of testing in which the seeker must become worthy before they can descend into greater communion with the earth goddess and, like the seekers on the quest for the Holy Grail, come into a closer relationship with their own souls.

This can especially be seen with the Welsh hunter god and psychopomp Gwyn ap Nudd, who is tasked with being the guardian of the Welsh underworld, Annwn, meaning ‘the deep place’. As leader of the spectral Wild Hunt at this time, he guides the dead to the underworld, and forces demons and all unquiet spirits away from the land of the living. He also competes with his summer counterpart Gwythr ap Greidawl for the hand of the sovereignty goddess Creiddylad, as part of an eternal love triangle between the land and the kings of summer and winter (see page 90).

The Wild Hunt

At this time the ghostly Wild Hunt is said to ride out, led across the Somerset levels and Wales by Gwyn ap Nudd. As well as being a guide to Annwn, he is also king of the Twylwth Teg, the faeries who are said to live beneath the lakes in the Welsh Black Mountains as well as under Glastonbury Tor in Somerset. Gwyn means white, bright or blessed and, luminescent, he leads the way through the darkness of the underworld, of the winter and the night. The son of Nudd, or Nodens, both versions of the Irish lunar god Nuada, Gwyn can be equated with the stellar figure of Orion the hunter who dominates the sky at this time of year and begins to rise above the Tor as Samhain approaches.

On the Wild Hunt, Gwyn is accompanied by ancestral spirits and the faerie hosts, to gather the spirits of the dead and lead them into the underworld. Riding his white horse, with the faerie hounds, the Cwn Annwn, yapping and howling across the skies, the Hunt brings with it storms, magic and sudden change – from life to death, and from death to life; it heralds the time when the wheel turns, fate is changed and the old year dies, falling with the leaves on the trees. While fierce and terrible, the Wild Hunt is a mercy to those that have lost their way between the worlds, or who are stuck in patterns that have outgrown them; aiding both the living and dead to move forward when all else has failed. Its primal energy touches the soul like a lightning storm, ripping away illusions and stagnation. The dead, met by the ancestors, ride with Gwyn and the Wild Hunt, taking one last look at the mortal world before travelling with him to the underworld, Annwn, where they rest and become renewed by the earth goddess once again.

The Wild Hunt

The Wild Hunt thus provides comfort in the knowledge that after death your soul will not get lost on its way to the lands beyond, and that the underworld will regenerate you in the womb of the goddess. In other parts of the Celtic diaspora, the Wild Hunt is led by other gods – Herne,

Cernunnos, Odin, Woden, Hyrla – and even by the historical figure Sir Francis Drake.

A prayer to Gwyn ap Nudd

You may call to Gwyn at any time of the year, but it is especially relevant to do so at Samhain. Pray to him in your own words to ask for blessings upon all those who have passed over the previous year, as well as for any spirits you think may not be at peace at this time. Gwyn can also be called upon to help you understand your own journeys, either in preparation for death, or with regard to knowing your own heart and hidden, inner truths and wilder nature. Considering your subconscious needs and issues can be very healing, as can taking the time to really connect with your deeper feelings and instincts.

As already discussed Gwyn ap Nudd is also king of the Tylwyth Teg, or fair folk. Gwyn and the faeries are often seen in woodlands and deep forests, as well as at the water's edge. This traditional prayer to him was recorded in the Middle Ages, and can be used or adapted to call upon him when going into wild places or as a precursor to any requests for help with healing or self-knowledge:

> *'To the king of spirits and his queen. Gwyn ap Nudd, you who are yonder in the forest, for the love of your mate, permit me to enter your dwelling.'*

Celtic starlore at Samhain

If we look high in the south in the night sky of the northern hemisphere, we can find the constellation of Orion, the hunter god. In the Celtic tradition, the gods Cernunnos, Gwyn ap Nudd and Arawn are all associated with Orion, as is Herne the Hunter. To the Celts, these gods were lords of the underworld as well as of wild animals. They are also understood as being gods of masculine energy, encompassing the male spiritual journey.

Orion is a far larger constellation than Ursa Major and Minor in the north, and as the night progresses and winter turns to spring he can be seen increasingly lying along the horizon. He is easy to find by looking first for

his belt, three bright stars, almost but not quite in a line. Orion's Belt is also notable to archaeo-astronomers for being the pattern of the Great Pyramids at Giza. Two stars in Orion are especially bright. The first is the orange-red Betelgeuse on the upper left of the quadrilateral, effectively upon his shoulder. The other is Rigel, which means 'giant's leg', upon his foot, which is especially bright white. Upon Orion's other (right) shoulder is the star Bellatrix, the female warrior. Just below Orion's Belt is his sword, and part of that sword is a misty patch, the famous Orion Nebula, a cloud of dust and gas that forms a stellar nursery deep in the heart of space.

Follow the line of Orion's Belt down and you come to Sirius, the Dog Star, by far the brightest star in the sky. Sirius is the lead star of Canis Major, the Great Dog or hunter's hound. In the Celtic tradition the hound is of special importance, as partner and guide to the hunter gods, as well as to many goddesses with underworld associations, and also refers to the Wild Hunt. His favourite hound, Dormach of the ruddy nose, always accompanies Gwyn ap Nudd in Welsh myth, and here we see his stellar counterpart. Higher up you will see Canis Minor, the hunter's second dog.

Samhain stellar meditation: Following Orion, a guide through the underworld of winter

In this meditation you can honour the growing darkness and the underworld, within your own psyche as well as in the world around you, helping you to cope better with the seasonal change and the challenges of the long winter nights ahead.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes relax gently behind your closed lids and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are walking along a pale shimmering path through the dusk. Behind you the last rays of sunset still glimmer upon the horizon, but ahead of you the sky and the world all around grows darker and darker. All you see is the pale path beneath your feet.

With every step the darkness grows, the dusky landscape all around becoming dimmer and dimmer. Ahead the path dips downhill, while a vast

hillside rises above and ahead of you, like a wall of shadows, merging with the night sky. The path ahead leads to the mouth of a huge cave. You stand for a moment at the entrance, and take three deep breaths. In front of you the darkness is as thick as velvet, complete without any sense of depth or distance. You look down and can just see your feet on the path, its glimmering path now dimmed and fading into nothingness ahead of you.

When you are ready step forward, trusting in the path beneath your feet. A cold winter wind blows into your face as you go, billowing around you, but there are no other sounds, other than the beating of your heart in your ears. You walk on slowly, into the darkness, until you begin to hear a very faint chime, like silver bells, and you notice faint glimmers of light ahead of you, growing stronger with every step. Slowly but surely the sounds grow, and your eyes focus more clearly – you see that far in the distance the stars are coming out, and you realize that what you hear is their silver song, chiming out across the night.

As you go further through the darkness, punctured now by faroff points of silver light, a sudden flare of light appears to your left, illuminating all around. A starry giant made of silver fire rises up from beneath the horizon, a huge hound of silver by his side. At the man's approach it is as if the darkness all around begins to shrivel and fade. He steps forward, oblivious to you, raises his arms and shoots a great fiery arrow out across the night. Luminescent he strides out, and at his heels comes the mighty hound. The darkness retreats as they approach, and you see that now that it is just the night sky, lit with stars.

You follow in the giant's wake, and as you look around you see there are many others, like you, shapes in the night, all being led through the darkness and the cold winds of winter. And what seemed once so utterly black, a great void, is altered now in his silver light. You see the land stretching out below you dusted with silver and glittering frost, beautiful and terrible, but an earthly place, a human place, with nothing to fear there. With every step the giant and his dog light up the night sky, leading you onward, the land stretching out beneath you. You know that he will be your guide through the winter, through the darkness. For a moment he turns and looks at you, and you see the light in his eyes, impossibly bright, and you know that the darkness can never be absolute. He will be here, striding

across the blackest of skies, through the darkest of winters, through the darkest of nights. There will always be his light to guide you home.

After a while, you feel it is time to return back to your body, and you see where you live below you. Easily as breathing, you drift down to your home, every breath you exhale helping you descend lower and lower, until you sense your body, quiet and comfortable. Breathe slowly and easily, and turn your attention to the breath in your lungs, the gentle expansion of your chest and belly, and feel your heart beating within you. Give thanks to Orion and his dog, for their care and protection.

Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always, before taking your time, wriggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes as you return to the everyday world again.

You may need to earth yourself carefully after this exercise, by eating and drinking, and taking your time to feel yourself back in your body and the everyday world.

Honouring the ancestors

Honouring our ancestral lines, especially at Samhain, was once central to Celtic spiritual practice. So much is inherited from our ancestors, for good and for bad, and to honour them was a way of drawing power from our roots as people, as well as sending healing across time to minimize negative patterns, to heal past hurts and ensure that the souls of our ancestors were at rest.

Barrow mounds and other structures, such as stone circles, woodhenges and natural caves, were used as places of ancestral power in the British Isles from the Neolithic era well into the Iron Age. After death, a body went through a period of spiritual stasis. During that time the body was, in Orkney and other places, exposed to the elements or put in a high place to have the meat picked from the bones by eagles – animals of massive spiritual significance; at other times and places bodies were cremated or housed elsewhere. In the Neolithic and Bronze Age the bones of certain people were then laid in a barrow to join others, forming an impersonal ancestral council; while in the Iron Age the Celts revered the bones and skulls of their leaders and powerful enemies and kept them in

their nemetons, or sacred groves. It is likely that people were chosen especially for these roles; the bones of men, women and children have been found in barrow mounds, as well as in the foundations of buildings and other structures, but the majority of dead bodies were not treated in this way.

It is thought that these bones represented the ancestors in an impersonal way, as guardians and guides rather than as individuals being remembered and consulted as themselves. These beings had transcended the human condition, to become the spirit representatives of the tribe, and perhaps of the human race itself, able to advise the living people on the land and also to intercede between them and other spiritual intelligences.

Once our relationship with the land of our birth was a close and intense one: we lived, ate and drank from its resources, the very earth in our locale was part of our chemical composition. Spirits of place would have been able to recognize us as native to that landscape, and would have known not only us, but also our ancestors, going back hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. We would have been kin. Sadly that is no longer the case for many of us, but those threads of connection do remain and can be cultivated through our ancestral lines, as well as through our links with the lands we live in today, even if we are newcomers or travel a lot.

We are each part of an endless continuum, from our ancestors in the distant past to our descendants in the far future, and no matter how far we travel, these threads remain in an endless chain of blessings as well as of constraints. By becoming conscious of this, we are empowered to overturn the negative patterns of the past and nurture what is positive, becoming beneficent ancestors ourselves in due course.

An ancestral shrine

Cultures all across the globe use shrines of one sort or another to venerate their ancestors. An ancestral shrine can be an elaborate affair, or as simple as a candle or single flower in front of a photo. Sometimes, if a particular ancestor is thought to have had a troubled life or difficult death, they may be given a position of prominence, marked by a picture or possession of theirs, which can be a focal point for prayers or healing. At other times, ancestors who are thought to be especially supportive may be honoured.

Gifts of food and drink, incense or flowers may be placed upon the shrine. At other times, ancestors may be given offerings of song or dance.

Sometimes the focus is on relatives who have passed on in the last 50 years or so, but it is often more effective to have a shrine dedicated to those further off, who have truly become ancestors in a non-personal way. These more remote ancestors can then be asked to support those newly passed, if necessary, and to help us in our day-to-day affairs as well as with deeper issues. Whatever difficulties we may encounter in our lives, there will be one ancestor if not many who have undergone and successfully negotiated the same difficulties, and they can assist us with strength and insight.

This Samhain you may like to make an ancestral shrine of some sort, whether it's just a few pictures on a shelf or a huge creative project that lasts for some time (during which relations with your ancestors are healed and renewed) and then is simplified down into something more permanent at a later date. Objects or images relating to the place you grew up, or where your family originates, can also find a home on such a shrine. Powers of place may be honoured there as well, local gods, and images of your landscape and its traditions, to support you and represent you to the spirit world, especially if you are in a new location.

Arranging an ancestral shrine can sometimes be deeply emotional, and if this is the case remember to treat yourself gently and be aware that difficult emotions may arise in order to be consciously accepted and healed. When considering the lives of those who have crossed over, it is important to distinguish between the person and their actions and to aim for a compassionate approach wherever possible, toward you as well as them. Sometimes the pain of loss is very great when thinking of those recently passed on and, again, compassion and gentle care is the best medicine. It is also important to be clear with yourself, in distinguishing between the living and the dead, and remembering that while in spirit terms the connection is never lost, there is a clear and healthy barrier between the two realms, which needs to be respected for the good of all.

The cave of the ancestors

This meditation and visualization can be undertaken at any time, but is especially relevant at Samhain as a safe way to help you seek advice from, and communion with, your distant ancestors, and to help you draw wisdom from your past and the history of your family line.

You may choose to set up an ancestral shrine in the room or place photos of your ancestors on your altar, if you have one – although this is not essential. When you are ready, take some deep breaths and ask your ancestors to guide you, using your own words, or try these:

> *'Blessed ancestors, I call upon you to guide me now, that I may seek your wisdom.'*

Close your eyes and imagine you are standing in a wood on a pale stone path. Follow the path through the trees, and after a while you notice you are circling a large hill of some kind. Eventually, you see a cave and hear running water in the distance. As you enter the cave you see flickering firelight and hear drums and singing, indistinctly at first, getting clearer as you approach. Suddenly you enter a large cavern, full of people, all sitting around a large fire. One of them rises to greet you – this will be your guide and ally to help and advise you. You go with them and take your place at the fire for a while. Feel free to ask any questions, or to just see if any of these people have any words or other guidance to give you. Simple time sitting in togetherness is fine, and can actually be the most transcendent experience. One or two of these ancestors may have a gift for you, and you may have one for them, which will appear in your hand.

When you are ready, thank them all and return the way you came, following the path between the trees for a while before wriggling your toes and fingers and feeling yourself back in your body in the everyday world. Be sure to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking, and perhaps writing about the experience in a journal.

An ancestral pilgrimage

Sometimes at Samhain it feels appropriate to make a pilgrimage in honour of your ancestors. This might be to a burial ground or a churchyard where

you know some of your family are buried, or even to their homeland. Or perhaps you may feel drawn to visit an ancient barrow mound with which you feel a particular connection. Research the possibilities and try to visit one of these sacred places and make simple prayers to your ancestral line, or just sit in silence for a while and contemplate the great spans of time your ancestors have lived through, right back to the beginning, to help you draw upon their wisdom, and honour all the diverse aspects of their lives that have brought you here.

A ritual of release

Another way to honour the ancestors at Samhain is to pay respects to everything in your past that has led you to this place, physically and metaphorically, spiritually and emotionally. You might like to try this simple ritual.

Take a handful of dried leaves, or incense with charcoal bricks, along with a fireproof bowl (unless you have a hearth or wood burner) and some matches. Extinguish all the lights in your household and spend a few moments sitting in silence, in darkness. Open the windows to let in the night and feel the breath of the underworld around you, the raven wings of the goddess-as-crone, the Cailleach upon your cheek. Hold the leaves and using your imagination pour all the deaths you have felt over the year, all sorrow, pain, anything negative, into them. Face the darkness, not as something to fear, but as an ancient friend that you have met many times before. Then, when you are ready, light a single candle and feel the brightness that this brings. Throw the leaves or incense, into your bowl or onto the fire, and watch them burn. Relight every candle in your home from the flames.

Samhain crafts

In the Celtic calendar, Samhain is a season to acknowledge the spirit world and our loved ones and ancestors who have passed into the otherworld. Taking time to make crafts that honour our grief and losses, as well as honouring the fertile darkness within our own psyches, can be very liberating and healing.

Jack-o'-lanterns

Carved pumpkin or Jack-o'-lanterns, placed in the window, acknowledge the great migration of souls that occurs at Samhain. Their fearsome faces represent the elemental and faery beings that assist this process. These lanterns were once carved from turnips and lit in remembrance of the dead, using torches lit from the Samhain bonfire. Alternatively, a candle can be placed in a bowl or cauldron, to remind us of our return to the womb of the earth goddess, deep in Annwn, where we all will become renewed when our time comes.

You will need

- *Pumpkin*
- *Ice cream scoop*
- *Spoon*
- *Pen*
- *Paper, tape and pin if making a template (optional)*
- *Sharp vegetable knife or small keyhole saw*
- *1 tbsp ground cinnamon*
- *Candle*

First thank the spirit of the pumpkin and ask it to bless and empower your work. Use your own words or try these: 'Pumpkin spirit, I ask that you work with me to make this lantern, make it magical, and powerful, a thing to delight and guide at this sacred time.' Keep speaking to the spirit as you work, asking it empower and bless your lantern.

Next, cut the cap or circular opening in the top using a knife or a small keyhole saw, cutting at an angle so the lid can rest on the sides and not fall through. Make the opening wide enough so that you can comfortably insert your hand, and scoop out the inner seeds and pith using a spoon and an ice cream scoop.

Draw on a grinning face design directly with a pen, or make a paper template. Tape the template to the pumpkin and mark out your design using

a pin. Try not to leave thin strips of pumpkin in your design, as these can weaken and tear. Carve the face by carefully following the design outline.

To make it extra special sprinkle some cinnamon onto the inside of the lid so that when it's heated it smells deliciously of pumpkin pie.

Light a fresh candle with thoughts of all who have passed from the world before us, and place it in the lantern, in this way connecting to your ancestors in a tradition of respect that stretches across millennia.

If carved carefully much of the pumpkin's pulp can be used to make delicious pumpkin soup or pie afterwards.

Magical scrapbook

You may like to begin compiling a seasonal scrapbook to record your celebrations and experiences of nature. Consider including photos and drawings, as well as collected items, such as leaves, flowers and seeds. You might like to write pieces of prose, poetry or songs to add, or copy down examples by others that inspire. You could also include notes on seasonal rituals and magic, or any visions or images you receive in meditation. This is an opportunity to indulge your inner child (see page 268), as well as creating a way of remembering and maintaining thankfulness for the earth's gifts and your own spiritual journey. You might decide to make this a simple personal project, perhaps a detailed magical diary, or do it together with your family, as you choose.

Wicker man

The Romans recorded the Celts as making wicker man structures filled with human sacrifices, but the only evidence for this is a single source (the writer Posidonios), which was taken up enthusiastically by Julius Caesar for political ends back in Rome. In reality, wicker men were unlikely to have contained human or animal sacrifices due to practical issues: a wicker fire would not contain them or burn long enough. However, offerings and sacrifices were made by the Iron Age Celts, and we can do this today in a way that is relevant and practical to us, as well as morally comfortable in the modern era. For example, you may like to make a wicker man filled

with herbs, petitions, prayers or spells to transform any negative feelings or circumstances and ask for the things you wish to come to you in the following year.

Many people make wicker structures filled with fruit, vegetables and grains to burn as an offering, and it is perfectly possible to make one out of twigs or straw, in any size you find practical.

You will need

- *About 15 sticks or twigs, approximately 30cm (12in) in length*
- *Red cord or string*
- *Pen and paper*
- *Pieces of ribbon*
- *Herbs – juniper, mugwort, rosemary or sage*

Take six sticks and form into a bundle. Use the cord or string to tie the bundle three-quarters of the way from the top to form the head and the body below it, and again quarter of the way up from the bottom, by wrapping the cord or string around and then tying in a tight knot.

Then tie together another bundle of three sticks and place it just below the head as a cross piece to form the arms. Lash onto the main stem.

Legs can then be added in the same way, by tying two bundles of three sticks each at their tops, and attaching them around the waist area.

Write spells or petitions on small pieces of paper. Insert these, with herbs, into the wicker man, also tying on pieces of ribbon, as offerings and prayers. Do this all with as much magical intent and care as you can, holding the wicker man in your arms and really putting as much energy into it as possible. This can then be burned upon a Samhain fire, or placed somewhere secret, preferably by the hearth.

Finally, thank the wicker man for his help, and, when you are ready, and it's practical, burn him safely, seeing the smoke sending your magical intentions out into the spirit world.

A Samhain altar

This, the first of the winter festivals, honours the animal cull, the dead and the world of spirits, so decorations of stones, bones and interestingly shaped sticks and twigs are all suitable objects for your altar, as are the colours black, white, purple and green. Decorations of natural objects, such as pumpkins and gourds, dried seedheads, nuts, sloe berries and antlers, all give the right feel. You may decide to create a sombre-looking altar or space, or go for a wilder, underworld/faery feeling, with moss and ivy wreaths. It's a matter of choice, so go with what really calls to you to honour this Samhain.

The Dumb Supper

A traditional practice at Samhain is the Dumb Supper, in which a meal is given to the dead. A place setting is laid at the head of the dinner table for one who has passed, and the living guests offer a plate of food to the departed, eating their own portion in silence and with great formal dignity in respect of the dead. An alternative to the Dumb Supper is to place a meal for the dead outside in a special place, such as on a garden table, an altar, a gravestone or at the foot of a tree, as an ancestral offering.

Kitchen witchery at Samhain

Samhain is a season for feasting, a great opportunity to delight our appetites and keep psychically grounded at a time when spirits abound. Venison is a really traditional food for autumn and winter seasonal celebrations, and venison steaks, sausages and burgers are all widely available. Other meats for the season are pork and boar.

Venison stew

A simple venison stew is easy to make and delicious but if you prefer the following recipe can be made using beef instead of venison. Alternatively, you might prefer to use pork or boar, in which case replace the red wine

with cider or apple juice and the junipers with 1 teaspoon freshly peeled and chopped root ginger. A tasty vegetarian version can also be made using vegetable stock, mixed beans and wild mushrooms. Serves six.

You will need

- *1 tbsp butter or oil*
- *2 onions, diced or thinly sliced*
- *1 clove of garlic, peeled and chopped*
- *1.5kg/3.5lb venison, cut into chunks*
- *5–6 juniper berries, crushed*
- *About 500ml/17fl oz/2 cups beef stock*
- *6 tbsp red wine (optional)*
- *2 carrots, peeled and diced*
- *2 sticks of celery, thinly sliced*
- *Sprig of fresh thyme*
- *Salt and pepper*

Place the butter or oil in a large pan or stockpot on a medium heat until hot, then add the onions and garlic to the pan and sauté until soft and caramelized.

Add the venison and juniper berries and continue sautéing until the meat is browned.

Add just enough stock to cover , as well as the wine (if using), carrots, celery and thyme, and stir to combine. Partially cover with a lid, to allow steam to escape, and leave to cook for about 2 hours on a low-medium heat until the meat is very tender. Check periodically and add a little water if it looks too dry. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Soul cakes

Soul cakes have their roots in the offerings made to the spirits of the dead in pre-Christian times. By the 19th century, they were a form of alms offered

to the poor and to children, who would pray for the dead or sing songs on All Souls Day on 1 November. This cake would be given to them in thanks.

You will need

- *375g/13oz/3 cups self-raising flour*
- *155g/5½oz/¾ cup caster sugar*
- *2 tsp ground nutmeg*
- *2 tsp ground mixed spice*
- *¼ tsp salt*
- *185g/6½oz/¾ cup butter*
- *125ml/4fl oz/½ cup milk*
- *1 egg*
- *90g/3oz/⅔ cup sultanas (golden raisins)*
- *90g/3oz/⅔ cup currants*

Sieve the flour, sugar, nutmeg, mixed spice and salt into a large bowl, then rub in the butter until the mixture looks like breadcrumbs.

Make a well in the centre and add the milk and egg, mixing well to combine. When you have a smooth batter, add the sultanas (golden raisins) and currants, and stir gently to combine.

Spoon out onto the baking sheet to make 12 scone-sized ‘cakes’ and bake in a preheated oven, 220°C/425°F/gas mark 7, for 10–15 minutes. They should have risen well and be a light golden colour when done.

Before eating them, you might like to share the following traditional soul cake song:

> *‘A soul, a soul, a soul cake*
> *Please good missus a soul cake*
> *An apple, a pear, a plum or a cherry,*
> *Any good thing to make you merry.*
> *Up with your kettles and down with your pans*
> *Give us an answer and you’ll be gone*
> *Little Jack sat on his gate*

Crying for butter to butter his cake
One for St Peter, two for St Paul
Three for the man who made us all!'

Pumpkin soup

Pumpkin soup has become a popular winter dish and is especially suitable for Samhain celebrations when the pumpkin represents the womb of the earth, and you may well have some leftovers from carving Jack-o'-lanterns (see page 241)! This recipe makes enough for 6–8 servings and can be frozen for up to two months so that you can make use of the pumpkins or squashes that are plentiful at this time of year.

You will need

- *4 tbsp olive oil or butter*
- *2 onions, finely chopped*
- *1kg/2¼lb pumpkin or squash, peeled, deseeded and chopped into small chunks*
- *700ml/24fl oz/3 cups vegetable stock*
- *140ml/4¾fl oz/½ cup double (heavy) cream*
- *Salt and pepper (to taste)*
- *Handful of dried pumpkin seeds and croutons, to garnish*

Gently warm the olive oil in a large saucepan set over a medium heat, before adding the onions and sautéing until pale and tender. Add the pumpkin and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until soft and golden.

Pour over the vegetable stock and simmer for a further 10 minutes or until the pumpkin is soft and cooked through.

Finally, add the cream, stir through and then blend with a hand blender or liquidizer until the soup has a smooth, creamy consistency. Season with salt and pepper to taste and ladle into bowls, then garnish with a few pumpkin seeds and croutons. Serve with plenty of warm crusty bread and butter.

Crossing the veil

Life is so often about balance, walking a line between too much and too little, between the past and the future, between the living and the dead, between our physical and material concerns and the needs of our spirits. There are many places on earth where the veil between the realms of the physical and the spiritual, the living and the dead, can be felt, and these are often considered sacred landscapes. But the balance between all things, the micro and macrocosm, the self and other, the mortal and the divine, must also be maintained by each individual, if we are to live a spiritual, conscious and sacred life. This veil between the worlds can be touched in all our lives from time to time, no matter where or how we live. How we respond to its challenge has much to teach us.

Living consciously with spirit enlightens and inspires, but can also lead to delusion and inflation, as the currents of the underworld tug on our psyches, reducing them sometimes to mere flotsam and jetsam, afloat on the energetic to-and-fro of the life beyond our individual stories. The underworld raises our demons, our fears and our shadow selves, the detritus of our own subconscious as well as that of those who have gone before, and we must rise to such initiations or be broken by them. If we feel the touch of Spirit, it may leave us changed for ever. But what an opportunity to live a life of magic and wonder! What an opportunity to grow, to heal and to become whole, for ourselves and generations to come.

We must remember that we all live surrounded by spirits, everything in existence is as alive as we are, in its own way, and we are merely a few of their number. But if we are brave enough, we can chart our course through life by riding these otherworldly currents, and be infused with the breath of the gods. We do this through balance: of logic with intuition, of pride with humility, of ecstasy with groundedness, of our sense of the spirit world combined with our sense of the everyday, mortal life – and also by remembering we, too, are sparks of the divine. We, too, find our origins in the arms of the Mother. The world of the spirits needs to be respected, but not feared because we are part of it. We are as much star-stuff as mortal, and these elements are of equal worth, of equal blessing.

A Samhain visualization

Use this exercise to feel the presence of the wild hunt and honour the passing of souls onto the next world, with the Cailleach as your guide.

See yourself standing between two tall trees beneath a night sky. There is a path leading ahead of you, down a lane lined with trees and overgrown hedges. The sky above is cloudy, with a full moon just visible from time to time between the scudding clouds. The air is still and your footfalls seem uncommonly loud upon the path, crunching on small stones underfoot. The silence around you seems to grow and gather, thickening in the darkness. Suddenly you hear the hoot of an owl and a cold north wind breaks the silence, shaking the last of the leaves from the branches and sending them dancing along the lane.

Ahead you see a small stone cottage, glimmering golden light peeping around thick curtains in the windows, tucked beneath a neat thatched roof. Its white stone walls shine beneath the dark sky. As you approach, the front door opens, and a small old woman steps out into her front garden. For a moment the lawn is flooded with golden light that vanishes as she closes the door behind her. She carries a lantern and waves to you, calling you over, and walking toward you as you approach.

In the flickering light of her lantern you see she has a kind, weatherworn face and twinkling dark eyes, and is wrapped in a large black shawl. Take a moment to greet her, and hear her wisdom. What does she say to you? Don't worry about imagining it; her message is whatever comes to you first.

After a time you notice the wind is picking up and the night has got colder. 'The Hunt will be coming soon,' she says. 'Would you like to see?'

Answer her honestly. If you choose you can return the way you came, back to the everyday world. If you choose to go on, she leads you around the side of her house, and through a long back garden lined with trees, which edges onto open fields. There is a white-painted wicker gate at the back of the garden. As you approach, the full moon breaks free of the clouds and all the world around you is bathed in silver light. You see you are at the top of a hill, looking out on a wide-open expanse. The moonlight makes strange twisted shapes of the trees below you, and the empty fields shimmer with mist that catches the moonlight as if you are staring out across a wintry sea.

You reach out to open the gate, your fingers touching the wood, but you feel a hand on your shoulder and you turn to see the old woman shaking her head. You may go this far and no further.

The wind whispers and hisses in the trees and grows stronger, roaring down the hillside. You hear distant voices and strange eerie calls like the yapping of hounds and the lonely cries of geese arcing overhead. The wind rises further still, tugging at your clothes, and in the strange silver grey light forms flicker across the sky, between light and shadow.

First come the hounds, streaking silver they speed ahead, clouds scattering at their approach, their eyes burning red and their teeth slavering as they yap and call. Following come the riders, men and women with flowing silver hair and robes made of starlight, serene moon-bright faces and fierce flashing eyes. In among them are others, they seem to walk slowly, tired and burdened with sacks and packs upon their backs, and bundles in their arms, yet they keep pace. Some of their faces are shadowed and sad, unseeing, while others look up and about them, an eerie light reflecting in their faces as they see the otherworld ahead of them, not the mortal life they leave behind.

Your heart beats tight in your chest, and for a moment you feel fear, and then the wind snatches this away too, dragging it after them and you realize that on this wild, fierce night, you see one of the wonders of creation, a great migration of souls as the wheel of the seasons turns to winter. There is grief here but with every step these travellers leave it further behind. And there is mercy also. No soul is abandoned, and while some leave the world in sorrow, others cross the veil with peace in their hearts, as pilgrims and adventurers.

You ponder this for a while, watching the wild procession pass overhead. Snatches of song accompany the yapping of the hounds, a slow soaring melody at the edge of hearing.

The old woman touches your shoulder and you realize it is time to go. She leaves the lantern at the gate, a sign of remembrance, to guide their journey through the night, and you follow her through the garden back to the lane.

In silence you wave goodbye, and return the way you came, along the pale stone path between the high hedges, which seem more normal, more earthly

now, as if you were taking a night-time stroll. You cross over the threshold between the two trees back to your body and the everyday world. Take your time. Feel yourself back in the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving about.

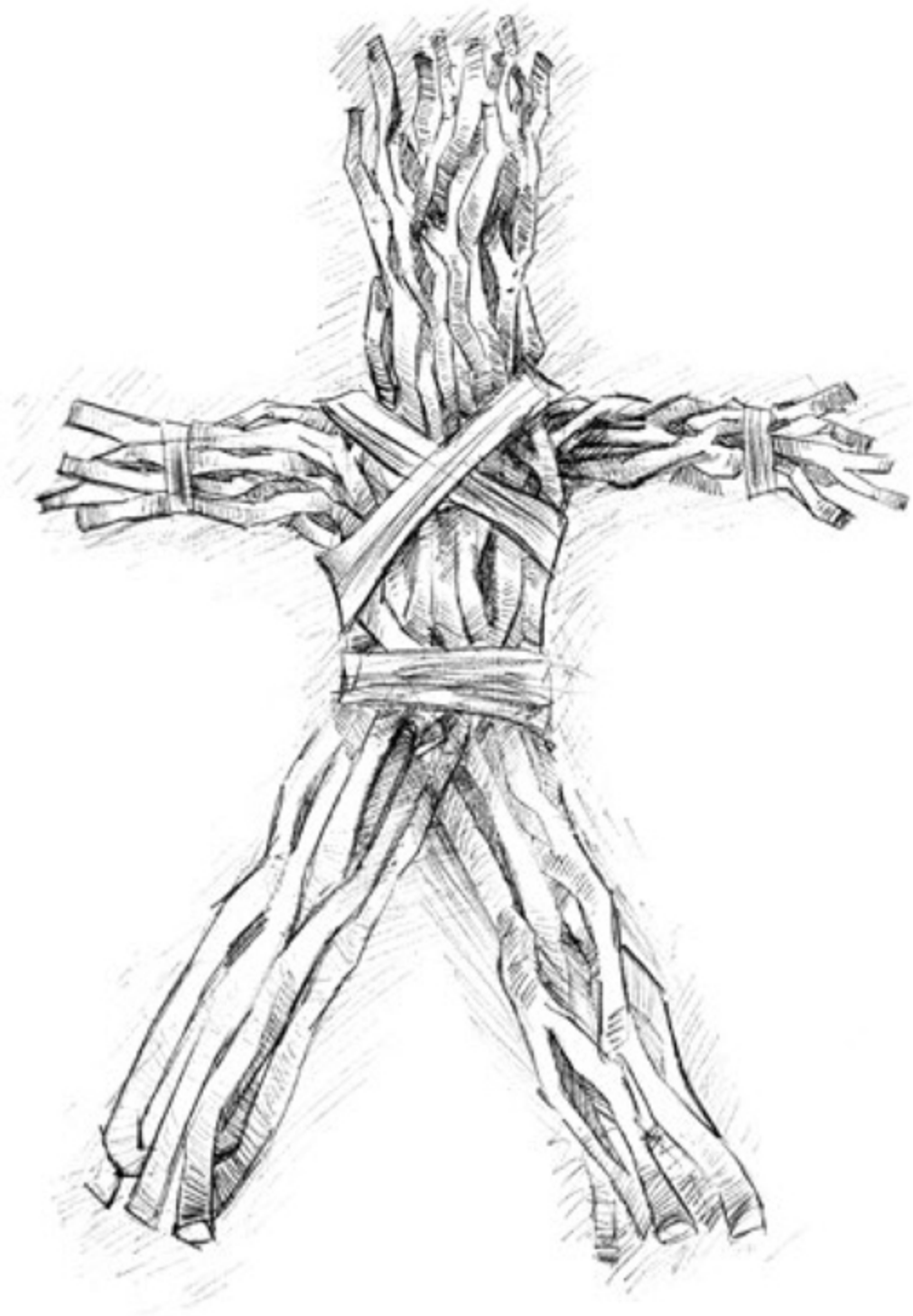
Remember to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

A Samhain ancestral ceremony

Samhain is such an evocative season. As the last of the leaves fall from the trees we know that winter is coming, and the world takes on a more contemplative feel as the evenings draw in. Whether celebrating as a group or alone, an important part of Samhain is to honour the spirit world and the ancestors, so take time to stop and remember those who came before you.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Find a place where you can light a Samhain fire and gather together to honour the spirits and your ancestors with costumes and tales of your family's history. You might also want to decorate your space with a small wicker man (see page 243), candles and a special Samhain altar (see page 245).



Wicker man for a Samhain ceremony

Encourage everyone to prepare and read aloud their family tree, their lineage, or just spend a while describing those who have passed in their family, recounting stories to honour their lives and the grieving journey of

those who remain. Remember to focus on their lives and loves rather than on the events of their passing, unless the circumstances are recent or in need of discussion among family and friends for everyone's healing and resolution.

This can be a deeply joyous experience for some, while for others it can be very emotional and even painful, even if it brings healing and a sense of completion. Treat everyone with gentleness and compassion, including the spirits of those who have passed.

Finish your ceremony with a Samhain feast to create a sense of communion with those around you. Try local, seasonal dishes, such as venison stew and pumpkin soup (see pages 246 and 248). Enjoy with friends and remember to leave out a portion for the ancestors.

Celebrating alone

In advance of your celebration you might like to make a magical scrapbook or set up an ancestral shrine with photos and mementos of those who have passed on (see pages 238 and 243). You might also like to prepare a traditional Dumb Supper or leave a lantern and a plate of food out for any spirits passing by (see page 245).

Begin your ceremony by calling in the four directions and creating a sacred space (see page 14) before calling to any gods that you feel drawn to, such as Cernunnos, Herne or Gwyn ap Nudd (see page 230), so that you can give thanks for their support. Alternatively, you could call upon the Cailleach for her wisdom and help. Use your own heartfelt words to call upon these deities, as this is always more authentic and powerful, but you might adapt these:

> *'Cernunnos, mighty horned one, lord of the hunt, lord of the cull and all wild things, the night of the year is upon us, grant me your hunter's vision, that I may see clearly through the darkness, and find my way through the thicket. Come to us here, and bless us. So may it be.'*

Here would be a good time to perform the stellar meditation or the Samhain visualization (see page 234 and 251), as well as the ritual of release (see page 241).

You may also want to light a Samhain bonfire to burn your wicker man (see page 245) or a special candle. When it is lit, take a moment to gaze into the flames in silence. In your mind's eye, imagine it burning and transforming all that has passed, and see it as a beacon fire, guiding you into the future, as well as leading the newly dead into the otherworld. You could also perform divination of some description, especially seeking the wisdom of the dead.

Another way to honour the season is to list all the main events and good memories of the last year. Asking the ancestors to bless you and guide your footsteps ahead, using your own words or try these:

> *'Blessed ancestors, those who have walked this road before us, we remember you and honour you always. May we receive your blessings and wisdom, and may we in turn be guided to care for those who come after us far into the future!'*

You might like to read aloud a song or a poem that you have written in honour of your deceased loved ones, or to mourn lost loves or other regrets, before letting them pass. Try a silent meditation considering the theme of stillness and death, or what is most precious to you in your life, the fleeting nature of time and the need to seize the day. Consider your legacy. When you pass from this life, what will you leave behind? This needn't be about a legal will – think more broadly. Will you leave fond memories in your loved ones, gifts of kindness and joy? Will you leave the earth a little better than you found it?

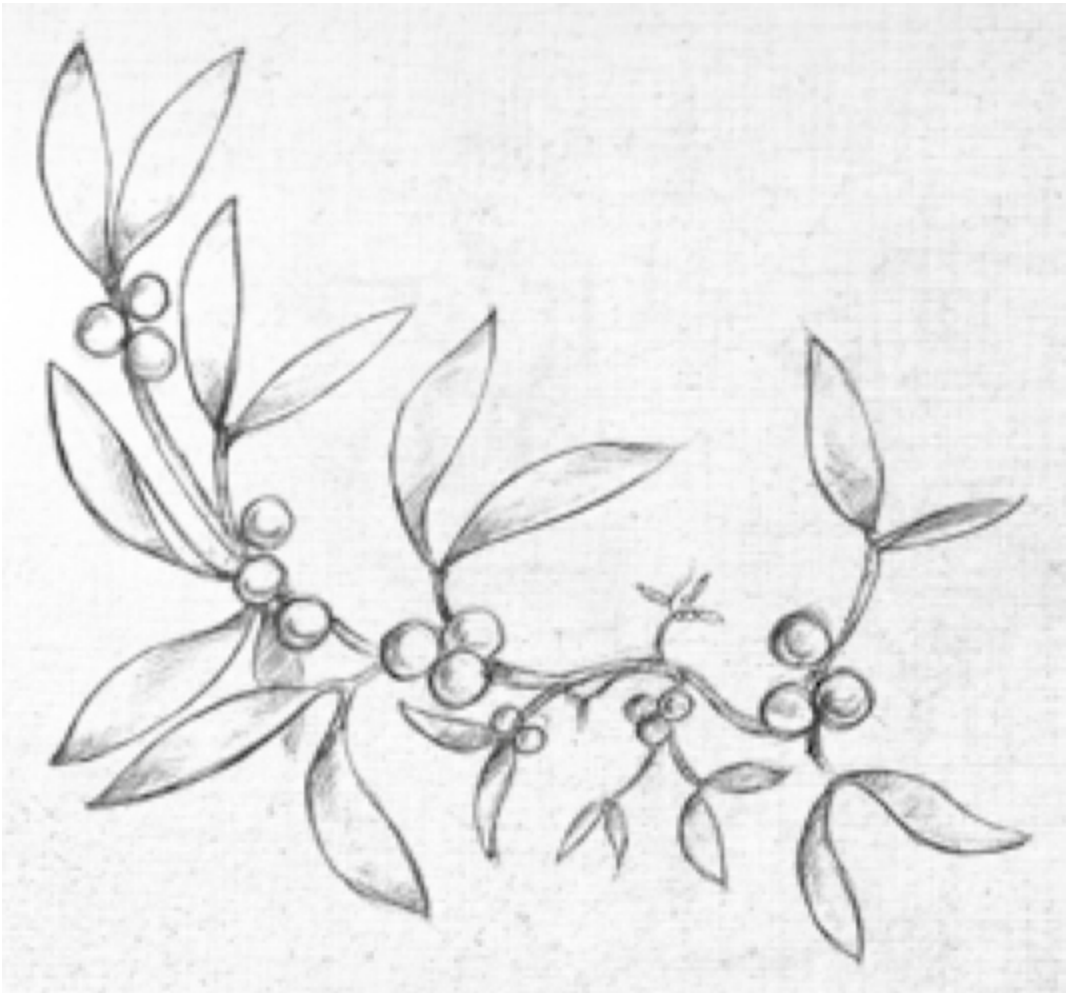
Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Samhain

In celebrating Samhain we are undertaking the sometimes difficult task of honouring the past, and the forces of decline and decrease, as well as facing our sorrows and fears. Taking the time to feel the darkness in our hearts, in whatever form, can be very healing and transformative, but also calls for courage and compassion for ourselves and others. In feeling our grief, in looking back, we can allow a conscious space for endings and letting go, which in due course will give way to a new beginning. But for now, our psyches may well be in tune with the falling leaves and the gathering darkness of winter ahead. And within that is a promise: if we can just hold on through the journey, spring will come and deep beneath the cold soil the roots will grow ever deeper, drawing on decay and transforming it into new life. It is the same with us; by accepting loss and periodically allowing our own descent into the underworld, we grow deeper, and richer within. The Winter Solstice is not so far ahead, and while we may face the darkness now, the first glimmer of the reborn sun will be with us soon.

Blessed be!

CHAPTER EIGHT
WINTER SOLSTICE



WINTER SOLSTICE – REFLECTION

20–23 December (northern hemisphere)
20–23 June (southern hemisphere)

In astronomical terms, the Winter Solstice is the single moment when the sun reaches its southernmost point in the sky (or its northernmost point if you are in the southern hemisphere). Solstice means 'sun stands still', and for three days at this time the sun appears to rise and set in the same southeasterly position on the horizon, before beginning its gradual incline north once more. It's a spiritual event as much as an astronomical one, heralding the rebirth of the year, as the day on which the Winter Solstice occurs is the shortest of the year, and the night the longest. From now on the sun will gradually arc higher and higher in the sky until it comes to another standstill at the Summer Solstice, on the longest day, when it rises in the northeast. In the southern hemisphere these same solar arcs produce the reverse effect, creating the Summer Solstice in the south, when the north experiences winter, and vice versa. In the northern hemisphere, the Winter Solstice takes place on a day between 20–23 December; in the southern hemisphere it falls between 20–23 June.

Key Themes

Solstice
the still, pivotal point in the wheel

Celebrating and honouring
letting go
sacrifice
transcendence

grace
forgiveness
peace
rest and reflection
giving
rebirth
renewal
silence
the child within

As the nights grow longer and all of nature seems to sleep, the rebirth of the sun draws near. The Winter Solstice, in the northern hemisphere at least, is a time of crackling fires, faery lights in the trees and deep, silent rest. Now is our chance to look within and enjoy spiritual hibernation, peace and renewal. The seeds of our future, resting in the rich earth, need this period of stillness, as do we.

This modern holiday season can also be a hectic time, when the stresses and strains of life keep us locked away from nature and more natural ways of being. The Winter Solstice, when the world appears to stand still, can serve as a moment out of time, an opportunity to reconnect with our own souls once again. As we mark the descent of the seasonal wheel and the height of the year's darkness, we realize that the light and warmth of the sun will soon be returned to us.

Alban Arthan, the name modern Druids give this time, means 'the light of Arthur'. Arth, or Arthur, means 'bear' in Welsh so Alban Arthan celebrates both the mythical King Arthur and the stellar Arthur, the Great Bear constellation, which shines brightly at this season. Arthur the 'bear' is a figure of hope and renewal in the Celtic tradition, while Arthur the 'Once and Future King' is both a fierce protector and leader of the people, as well as the god-king who rises and falls, just like the sun.

In the Celtic wheel, the Winter Solstice is placed in the north, the position of death and rebirth. This is symbolized by the Great Bear constellation, also known as 'Arthur's Wain', which rises in the north during the winter months. And so Alban Arthan, 'the light of Arthur', honours the return of Arthur at this, the darkest time of the year. The old god falls and is born anew. If we now 'go within', into the deep caves of our own psyches, our instinct to seek quiet and warmth can lead to our

regeneration, allowing us to enter the new year with renewed vigour and enthusiasm.

Winter Solstice at Stonehenge

Winter Solstice around the world

The Winter Solstice has been of deep spiritual significance since the Neolithic era and was marked by the stone circles and rows, passage tombs and temples left by the first farmers ever to till the rich earth. There are a number of sites aligned to the rising or setting of the sun in the UK and Ireland: the ancient monuments at Maeshowe on Orkney, at Stonehenge in Wiltshire and at Newgrange in County Meath. Other sacred places around the world that celebrate the Winter Solstice include the Hopewell culture sites of High Bank Works in the USA at Chillicothe, Ohio, and the Marietta Earthworks, also in Ohio, as well as the Temple of Karnak in Egypt, Goseck circle in Germany and the recently built Stonehenge Aotearoa in New Zealand.

One of the most famous places aligned to the Winter Solstice is Newgrange, also known as Brú na Bóinne (Palace of the Boyne), a majestic structure dating from 3200 BCE. This circular cairn or passage tomb has an exterior of white quartz and rounded granite boulders, and its impressive entrance stone is famously carved with intricate spiral designs, referring perhaps to the wheel of the seasons or the repeating journey through life, death and rebirth. Its entrance also includes a small 'roof box' through which the first rays of the Winter Solstice sunrise penetrate the deepest recesses of the tomb and illuminate the triple spiral carved upon its back chamber.

Guarding the spirit of the green

Many cultures have a Green Man or god of nature and vegetation in their folklore and mythology. From the Mesopotamian Dumuzi to the Greek Attis and the Egyptian Osiris, the image of the Green Man, embodying the life force of the earth, calls us back into relationship with nature once again and reminds us of his many gifts. The Green Man always undergoes a death and journey through the underworld during the season of winter before being reborn in the spring.

The foliage-covered face of what we have come to call the Green Man is carved upon medieval church walls all over Europe and is still a popular name for British pubs. These mysterious figures stand for our enduring love of the wild green spaces of the earth, and reveal threads of indigenous pagan belief enduring through millennia. During the winter months, we know him in British folklore as the Holly King, the Wild Hunter and the

spirit of the forest, keeping the fertility of the coming year safe in his spiky evergreen leaves, till spring returns.

King of winter

The Holly King features in British myths and folklore in numerous guises: a Green Man, he also hearkens back to the old Saxon and Celtic hunter gods, such as Woden, the antlered Cernunnos, Gwyn and, later, Herne (see page 230). He also features in the medieval tale of Gawain and the Green Knight, who carries a holly staff as a symbol of his authority and challenges King Arthur's court. His Green Lady, who attempts to seduce Gawain in a test of honour, is a version of the sovereignty goddess for whom the kings or gods of winter and summer do battle at each turn of the season, in order to bring fertility to the land (see page 90). In medieval times a boy would play the part of the Holly King and walk around the town accompanied by his bride, the Ivy Girl, and the couple would tease and taunt each other in a kind of ritualized courtship – a lingering echo of a far more ancient tradition.

Invoking the Holly King

The Holly King can be called upon to assist you during winter. He is concerned with all sorts of practical issues, such as the ability to support yourself or to provide for your family, but he is also helpful whenever you are undergoing any kind of emotional or spiritual winter. We all experience times of doubt and darkness, of emotional drought or ennui, when our energy or enthusiasm is low and we feel overwhelmed by circumstances. Calling upon the Holly King can give us an extra boost and encourage our life force and enthusiasm to burn brighter, reigniting our lives and perspectives and bringing on the thaw.

The Holly King, ruler of winter

First, stand up straight and take three deep breaths, really feeling your connection with the earth beneath your feet anchoring you to the present moment. Take a holly leaf and hold it up either to the sun or to the flames of

a fire. Let your vision soften so that, without blinding yourself, you let the image of the holly and the light blend into each other. Alternatively, do this in your imagination. Feel the earth beneath you, and the great heat within the land, the fire at the centre of the earth radiating up through the rock and soil to where you stand. This heat, this fire, like the sun, endures throughout the winter; it has burned since the dawn of time. Now focus again on the holly – how green and robust it is, how full of life. This is the sign of the Holly King, guardian of that fire within the land, guardian of the winter sun. Call to him, using your own words, or try these:

> *'Holly King, lord of winter, I call to you. Here in this place I feel winter's chill, but I also know the heat of the eternal fires that you keep. I give thanks to you for all your blessings and for the challenges you teach me to overcome. Hasten to my aid! Lend me the strength to endure and shine bright, and let life return to me. Blessed be!'*

Be still and quiet, and receptive to any ideas or images that come to you, as these may be guidance from the Holly King to support you at this time.

Focus again on the holly leaf and, in your inner vision, imagine it filled with fire and heat till it glows with golden light. Keep the leaf with you, in your pocket or in a special pouch or bag, as a talisman to support you and remind you of his guidance.

The wondrous child

At midwinter the days are at their shortest and the powers of light and warmth are subdued by those of darkness and cold. However, from this point onward the days lengthen. It is at this pivotal point in the year when the lord of the sun is born anew, bringing with him hope and renewal and life once again. While the sun seems to 'stand still' for this precious moment, we know that it will not be so dark again for another year. For this reason, in mythologies all around the world, many sun gods and magical children are said to have been born at this time. These beings are often called the 'child of promise' or the 'wondrous child' who heals the world by his very birth.

As well as Jesus Christ, sun gods such as the Roman Mithras and the Greek Attis are said to have been reborn at the Winter Solstice. In Roman times, the modern date for Christmas, 25 December, was declared the birth date of Sol Invictus, the 'unconquered sun', long before it was associated with Jesus. Moreover, a cult of the sun is said to have existed right back to Etruscan times (*c*. 700–200 BCE).

In ancient Britain, sun god imagery can be found in tales of King Arthur as well as in the old Celtic myths about the Mabon. The Welsh tale of Culhwch and Olwen, for example, tells how Culhwch, King Arthur's nephew, must hunt a giant boar named Twrch Trwyth in order to prove his worth and win the hand of the maiden Olwen. The only way he can accomplish this is by seeking the aid of the greatest hunter of the realm – Mabon, son of Modron. Mabon, whose name means 'son of the mother', was stolen from his mother's side when he was two nights' old and is one of those perennial figures in Celtic and indeed world mythology: the wondrous child. He embodies the child within us all that is so easily lost, as well as hope, renewal and promise for the future. These solar qualities eventually overcome the spirit of the King of Winter, as signified by the giant boar, an ancient Celtic totem of power and leadership, hunted through the winter months.

It is important to connect with our own wondrous inner child during the Winter Solstice; this is a time of peace and dreaming to find a new way to relate to the world and ourselves. So much of our day-to-day lives is filled with work, duty and responsibilities of all kinds that it's vital for our wellbeing to take this precious moment to shake ourselves free of restrictions and rediscover what truly gives us joy and hope.

Befriending the child within

Midwinter is full of opportunities to reignite your imagination and enchant your life once more. Seasonal arts and crafts, messing about in the woods, joining in children's games and imaginative activities that absorb you will all nourish your inner child and help you rediscover the gift of being rather than doing. You might also like to spend some time remembering the dreams you had for your life when you were young. While some of those dreams may not be ones you have now, allowing yourself to re-envision

your life, even for just a while, can be a powerful act of healing and empowerment. Ask yourself:

- *If you could be anyone, doing anything, who would that be?*
- *And what would you do?*

The choice to be whomever and whatever we wish never really leaves us, although the everyday world might encourage us to forget this fact. All we need to do is allow ourselves to rediscover our own wondrous child within. When we remember the magic we once felt was possible in the world, we open up to everything life can offer us. Hold those dreams tight, let them guide you and just allow your adult self to work out the details and act upon them.

Celtic starlore at Winter Solstice

During the Winter Solstice the stars are especially bright and looking into the heavens and imagining how they were perceived long ago can be really spiritually uplifting. The retreat of nature allows the stellar realm to come into greater focus; the stars twinkle through bare branches like frosty flowers as the earth sleeps.

In the northeast sky, the constellation of Ursa Major, the Great Bear, or 'Arthur's Wain' is especially significant. The mythical King Arthur gains his name from the ancient Celtic bear god Artaius and his mother Artio, deities of the earth who retreat into womb-like caves over winter, and this constellation and its accompanying one, the Little Bear, is named in the Celtic tradition in their honour.

Part of the Ursa Major constellation is the asterism (star pattern) known as the Plough or the Big Dipper. This is made up of six bright stars and a seventh fainter star. The two stars on its right-hand edge (the edge of the cup of the Big Dipper, from bottom to top) lead us in the direction of Polaris, the Pole or North Star. This star is hardly seen to move and, from our perspective, functions as a central axis point around which the heavens move. Polaris is the brightest and final right-hand star in the constellation Ursa Minor (the Little Bear) which, like the Mabon, can be understood as a sacred 'wondrous child'.

Winter Solstice stellar meditation:
Honouring the rebirth of the light

This meditation seeks out the Great Bear so you can enable the birth of the Mabon, the child of promise, within your own soul, as you seek renewal and rebirth in your own life by honouring the darkness and the return of the light within.

Sitting comfortably, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Let your eyes gently relax behind your closed lids and allow your imagination to sink into the darkness. Let your breathing deepen and slow naturally, then expand your awareness to imagine that you are in a vast, dark cave. Gradually become aware that your breathing is being matched by a huge, warm presence all around you, and you feel a great heat and stillness radiating out from its form, unseen in the darkness. This is the Great Mother Bear, the ancient and most powerful mother goddess, deep in the womb of the earth. Allow yourself to be still and breathe, feeling her presence and stillness, her slow beating heart surrounding you with love, comfort and acceptance.

In time you become aware of a distant pinprick of light far ahead and you feel the Great Mother Bear begin to stir. Together you go toward it, you and she, walking side by side, slowly and deliberately through the darkness. You feel her warmth and support, her deep, wild kindness surrounding you and giving you courage.

The pinprick ahead grows bigger and brighter and suddenly, with a great push, you emerge from the cave into dazzling silver light. The Great Mother Bear still supports you as you find yourself surrounded by the stars, vast and powerful beyond measure. You chime with the great song of the heavens, which is unknowable and yet has been the rhythm of your blood ever since you were born onto the earth. The light envelops you as thickly as the warm fur of the Great Mother Bear and your very being fills with light and love. As you gaze around you, you know the stars, their constellations, the planets, the comets and all the magnitude of life in the universe as one great whole and for a moment you know yourself to be divine.

Now, gently as falling snow, you feel yourself drift down once more from your divine self, down onto the beautiful, precious earth below you, a blue-green jewel … and, as easily as breathing, you find yourself back in your body once more, eyes closed, your heart beating slowly and steadily. Hold for a moment the memory of what you have seen and felt, and know it is yours, always. Then wriggle your fingers and toes and open your eyes as you return to the everyday world. You may need to ground yourself carefully after this exercise by eating and drinking and taking your time to feel yourself back in your body.

Mistletoe magic

There is one plant that holds much of the magic of the Winter Solstice within it: the mistletoe (*viscum album*), also known as the Golden Bough. This evergreen plant grows in large clumps in the branches of trees – especially apple trees – and in winter its white viscous berries can be a common sight in orchards and even suburban gardens. Writing of the Iron Age Druids, the Roman author Pliny tells us that they cut branches of mistletoe with a golden sickle on the sixth day of the moon after the Winter Solstice. Known as 'all-heal', mistletoe was a powerful talisman for healing, fertility and magic, its sticky white berries perhaps signifying the seed of the Sun God himself, ready to impregnate the land with new life. The mistletoe was of such deep significance during midwinter that the practice of finding a place for it in our homes remains to this day, surviving as part of the Christmas celebrations. The fertility magic it embodies is still recognized, albeit in a more restrained form perhaps, in the tradition of kissing beneath it.

The ancient Druids considered mistletoe especially sacred when it grew on an oak tree – the oak being dedicated to the god of the sun. However, apple trees are wonderful spirits in their own right and mistletoe from an apple tree works just as well if you want to bring a little fertility magic into your home during the winter.

Gathering mistletoe to make a charm

Wrap the mistletoe in a white cloth before hanging it in special places around the home, tied with red or white ribbon. Hanging mistletoe over the

bed with a simple prayer for a child is an ancient charm to enhance fertility, whereas placing it over the hearth or the front door encourages kinship, goodwill and a happy home. Hang up your mistletoe with simple prayers for love, good friendships, a beautiful home and garden, success in your business or any creative adventure, and it will bring your dreams to manifestation in the coming spring. When the solstice has passed, either leave the mistletoe in its place or find another respectful place to hang it over the coming year and then burn it at the following Winter Solstice, replacing it with a fresh bunch.

Here are some tips for gathering mistletoe from the wild:

- *Before you cut it, ask that the plant give some of its spirit to bring the gift of life into your home.*
- *Cut it with as much respect as possible, using sharp secateurs. Never take all of it.*
- *When you have cut it, place your hand over the cut and thank the mistletoe spirit in your own words, lending some of your care as an exchange.*
- *If you want to use mistletoe as a charm, don't allow it to touch the ground or its powers will dissipate into the soil (though this is good for Mother Nature as its ancient magic is said to bring spring back to the earth).*

Mistletoe spell for fertility or creativity

This sacred plant can bring some vital life force and good luck into your home at a time when your energy may be running low. Try a spell to add a little extra magic to your mistletoe and bring your dreams to life.

Create a sacred space in any way that suits you (a clean and tidy table will serve just as well) where you can set out what you will need for the spell: a fresh white candle, some matches, a few mistletoe berries and a small white pouch.

Start by taking a few deep breaths, then ask aloud that all good spirits aid you and bless your work. Now light the candle and, in your own words, ask aloud that you may draw greater creativity or fertility into your life. Be

specific about the sort of creativity or fertility you want. What do you want to draw to you? Do you want to learn new skills? Or do you want to bring a child into the world? Perhaps you are looking for more creative ways of being or of handling a situation or of bringing healing into your life.

Hold the berries in your hand and again, in your own words, ask the mistletoe spirit to help you. State aloud what you wish to bring to you; confide in the mistletoe like a trusted friend. Imagine you can see the berries glowing with golden light. With every deep breath you take, the light grows stronger, and the two of you begin to set the magic to work.

When you are ready, thank the mistletoe and place the berries in the pouch, and either carry them with you or keep them somewhere safe for the next three months. Snuff out the candle, and relight it each evening until it burns down. After three months bury the mistletoe in the earth with your thanks.

Tending the green spirit

The ancient tradition of bringing an evergreen tree into the house at the Winter Solstice transcends national customs. It harks back to our pagan past, when evergreen boughs were considered to be embodiments of the spirit of life and were brought inside to ensure its survival through the winter months.

If you bring an evergreen into your home to encourage cheer and fertility over the season, consider choosing one that is still living. If it is a cut tree, placing it in a stand with a water reservoir or in a bucket of wet sand will preserve its life force for longer. As you decorate the tree, place each object on it with a blessing. Giving thanks for the tree's sacrifice, talk to it as an honoured guest and a symbol of the Holly King or Green Man. When the season has passed, cut a piece of the trunk and wrap it up to burn as next year's Yule log, forging a link between the spirits of the wild and the celebrations of one year and the next.

Siberian Santa

In Siberia and other northern cultures where indigenous shamanic practice survives, pine trees are often considered to be 'World Trees', which the shaman climbs to contact the spirit world. Evidence suggests

that early versions of Santa Claus were echoes of these shamans, dressed in skins and descending (now down the chimney) with gifts from the realms above.

Winter Solstice crafts

In the Celtic calendar, the Winter Solstice is a time of stillness and rebirth, when the wheel of the seasons completes its turning, only to begin again. Try making holly wreaths and beautiful orange pomanders to create a more festive atmosphere and scent your home.

Holly wreath

A holly wreath is a powerful, traditional charm that can protect your home from winter storms and bad luck as well as being a festive decoration. Wreaths can be made either by using a traditional florist's hoop stuffed with moss, or a sponge oasis, or they can be bound alone in a hoop. The plants you use can add extra magic and spiritual significance. Heather looks good and, like ivy, is sacred to several Celtic goddesses, and holly is, of course, sacred to the Holly King himself.

To make the wreath, you'll some holly and ivy and/or greenery of your choice. You could use plants from your garden or gather responsibly from your local area. Start by tying the greenery into a circle or around a florist's hoop and secure with red ribbon. Tuck and weave the stems of greenery into each other to make a form that holds together well.

Additional florist's wire hidden in the foliage can be used to provide extra, invisible structure. Be creative but keep it simple, as a more rustic look often works best.

When you have made the wreath, hold it up toward the sun and ask that it be blessed and charged with protection for the home and all those within it. This is old magic. Use your own words, as they come from your heart and express your true intentions; or you can try this simple prayer:

‘Lord of the winter sun, empower this, your charm, and grant this home and all those within it your protection and blessing over this sacred time. So may it be!’

Hang the wreath on the front door, or use it as a decoration around a solstice candle in a place of honour, such as in the centrepiece for a table or over the fireplace. Other pieces of holly can also be blessed and charged in the same way and placed over doors and windows.

Orange pomander

Oranges, or other citrus fruits, can also be made into scented decorations using the sun wheel symbol (a cross within a circle), by pinning cloves into the fruit in this pattern. Symbolic of the sun, these pomanders look beautiful hung on a tree or placed in a painted bowl on a table. If you plan to prepare several pomanders, consider wearing thin gloves, as pinning in cloves can make thumbs sore.

To make your pomander, take an orange or other citrus fruit and pin a line of cloves around it, so that a vertical band encircles the whole fruit. You may choose to do this as a single line of cloves, or as two lines spaced apart, or make a dense band by pinning multiple cloves close together. Next, pin in a horizontal band at right angles around the orange, to create the cross-beams of the sun wheel. Tie a ribbon around the pomander to hang it from the tree. If you want to make a more complex design, such as stars or spiral patterns, you can mark out the outline first, either using single cloves or with a pencil, and then fill in the shape you require.

Orange pomanders

A Winter Solstice altar

An altar displaying objects associated with the Winter Solstice will add real festive spirit to your home. Candles, pinecones and evergreen boughs look lovely placed upon a white, green or red cloth, but use whatever natural objects and greenery signify the season for you. You could also add an oil

burner and pictures of beautiful winter scenes, perhaps including one that features sunrise.

Wassailing

The practice of blessing each other and the spirits of the orchards with homemade spiced cider or ale, together with songs and merriment, goes back to Anglo-Saxon times. Wassailing, as it is known, now usually takes place on Twelfth Night (6 January) in the northern hemisphere, but it used to be practised at Yule, Imbolc and other seasonal feast times, too. In your modern Winter Solstice celebration (see page 287), you might want to revive this tradition as a way of gathering with friends, family and community to appreciate the gifts of nature.

Make your offering to the spirit of the orchard – sometimes known as the Apple Man or Avalloch (see page 197) – by pouring a cup of warmed cider and placing a piece of toast at the roots of an apple tree or any other fruit-bearing tree. Take your time and do this reverentially, being truly present as you thank the trees for their gifts of fruit over the summer and ask that they continue in their generosity in the coming year. Say these words:

> *'I thank you, Spirit of the Apple Tree, for all your gifts, this year and the next! Blessed be!'*

Kitchen witchery at Winter Solstice

Going back millennia the Winter Solstice has been a season for feasting and gathering with family and friends as a way of bringing the light back into our lives at this darkest time of the year. Eating delicious seasonal local produce, as well as sharing our abundance with others, binds us closer to our environment and community and brings the sacred as well as the sensual into our everyday lives in a meaningful way. Spiced cider and mulled wine are traditional drinks for the season and are deliciously warming after a cold day.

Spiced cider

This recipe is really easy to make and perfect for wassailing. For a non-alcoholic drink, replace the cider with apple juice.

You will need

- *3 apples, grated*
- *1.5 litres/52fl oz/6 cups cider or apple juice*
- *75g/2½oz/⅓ cup brown sugar*
- *½ tsp whole nutmeg, grated*
- *¼ tsp ground cloves*
- *3 tsp dried cinnamon stick, grated*
- *2 tsp fresh ginger root, grated*

Place the apples in a large pan and cover with the cider, then cook for about 5 minutes or until the fruit is soft.

Add the sugar and spices and gently simmer for 20 minutes to 1 hour, depending on your taste.

Pour into a large cup or bowl to be shared around, while offering the blessing ‘waes hael’ (‘good health’).

Mulled wine charm sachets

An essential part of the holiday season, mulled wine is very easy to make. These sachets are wonderful aromatic gifts and can be imbued with a little magic for extra cheer.

You will need, per sachet

- *4 tsp brown sugar*
- *1 tsp ground cinnamon*
- *1 tsp ground ginger*
- *1 tsp whole or ground cardamom*
- *½ tsp whole cloves*
- *½ tsp whole star anise*

- *4 tbsp dried rose petals*
- *One tumbled quartz crystal for blessings – for example, choose rose quartz for love or citrine for solar blessings*
- *Small muslin drawstring pouch*

Place the sugar, spices and rose petals in a bowl with the crystal and stir the ingredients deiseil (clockwise or sunwise) with a wooden or silver spoon, to make the mix resonate with the energy and movements of the sun. Smile as you work to imbue the mix with love, and visualize the light of the sun going into the mix, with all the fresh energy and heat of the summer to come, growing steadily as you stir. See this as a spiral of golden orange energy coiling around the bowl. Then say:

> *'Holly and Ivy, queen and king, to me your magic and blessings bring. Rid all those who taste this of cold or fear, and grant to us all your blessings and cheer!'*

Repeat the rhyme over and over, feeling the energy and your intention build until you sense that the mix is full of the magic and blessings of the sun. Remember to thank the sun and the earth goddess when you've finished.

Finally, place the mix and the crystal into the muslin bag, and you have a magical winter gift for friends and family. As you do this, think of the person you are giving it to and add any specific prayers for their future at the same time, in your own words. For example, you might say:

> *'May* [insert name] *be happy, wealthy and wise!'*

Alternatively, you can repeat the above spell while adding the ingredients to the wine in a pan and stirring your intention into the brew while it heats.

Lighting the darkness

For thousands of years solstice fires have been lit at this time to celebrate the rebirth of the sun. By lighting our own fire, we feel the connection with

the generations who have done this before and the bright firelight reminds us of the sun, offering inspiration and cheer.

Winter Solstice fire

A solstice fire can be lit inside your home if you have a hearth, or built in a garden or other outdoor space. Try to make it a wild fire (a fire lit without a lighter or chemicals), if you have the skill. The solstice is a good time to experiment with these old skills and there is plenty of information on bush-craft websites to help you. There is a primal satisfaction in learning fire lighting, a skill our ancestors all had but so many of us have now lost. Alternatively, light your fire with firelighters and a little kindling before adding larger logs. When your fire is burning merrily, give thanks to the fire spirits and make offerings of wood, prayers and incense. Use your own words and initiative to make the ceremony your own.

Solstice candle

If you want a solstice focal point in the home try using a large pillar candle – red, white or gold are the best colours for this, as they are reminiscent of the sun itself. You can anoint the candle with frankincense or cinnamon essential or perfumed oil and place it somewhere prominent, surrounded by a holly wreath or other seasonal decorations. Light it with a prayer to the lord of the sun each evening, and snuff – never blow – it out at night. Blowing out a magical candle sends the magic out to wander and dissipate freely with unexpected results! That's OK for a birthday wish, but not for something sacred and deliberate.

Yule log magic

The Yule log is a wonderful ancient tradition found all across Europe and can truly help us to keep in mind the cyclical nature of the seasons and maintain our hopes and spirits from one year to the next. The log is a special piece of wood – a root or part of the evergreen tree brought in during the Yule holidays that you burn with a special prayer or wish. A solstice fire is the perfect place to burn a traditional Yule log.

Write down your wishes for the following year on small pieces of paper, along with a list of the things you are grateful for, and tie them to the log with red ribbon. When your solstice fire is going well, add the log to the flames so that the flames transform your wishes and ascend to the spirit realms upon the smoke. Keep a small piece of the log to use as kindling for next year's Winter Solstice fire to maintain a cycle of magical intent from year to year, as well as to align your sacred actions to the ever-turning cycle of the sun itself.

Gaelic winter blessing

Blessing the house is a traditional practice, filling the home and its inhabitants with spiritual light at the time of greatest darkness. This blessing (recorded in *The Carmina Gadelica*) and other similar ones, referring to a king or lord of the sun, were used in the Scottish Highlands and Islands until the last century, usually at Winter Solstice. Signs of earlier pagan blessings remain within them and they can be adapted to suit a modern celebration.

'Hail King! Hail King! Blessed is he! Blessed is he!
Prosperity be upon this dwelling,
On all that you have heard and seen,
Bless this house and all that it contains,
From rafter and stone and beam;
Deliver it to God and Goddess from pall to cover,
Be the healing of men therein,
Be you in lasting possession of this house,
Be you healthy about the hearth;
Let there be Joy!'

Solstice silence meditation

This meditation creates a space for us to go within and deep into the earth to find peace. It's an opportunity for self-reflection and connection at this

sacred time. It is best practised somewhere quiet and cosy, perhaps late at night by the fire or wrapped up warm and snug in a blanket.

Begin by sitting comfortably and closing your eyes. Take three deep breaths. Feel the breath deep in your stomach and, as you breathe out, let any tension inside you and any everyday thoughts just drift away.

After a while, let your attention gently rest upon the vast depth of the sleeping earth beneath you and the all-encompassing warmth at the great heart of the planet. Now let your attention drift again and imagine all the sleeping animals, snug in caves and dens; envision all the seeds and bulbs, the sleeping roots wrapped in soil and feel the roots of your own being, deep and still, in the enveloping quiet of the earth. When you are ready, slowly let your attention rise back into your own body, up into your heart and the warm dark space in which it resides in your chest. Feel its steady rhythm, its slow pulse. In this warmth and quiet, just be a while. Take this chance to be still and listen to your heart.

Mixed thoughts and feelings may rise to the surface here and, if they do, greet them with peace and gentleness. It has been difficult for them to draw your attention. The quiet voice with which they speak to you is your inner self, the voice of your soul, and any message they bring is a rare treasure. Treat the promptings of your heart with great care and compassion, like tiny seeds of the future that you will grow within yourself during the spring to come.

Spiritual light

We may not always be able to visit a sacred site aligned to the Winter Solstice, but we are able to visit such places in spirit and in our imagination. Working this way stimulates our inner vision and engages our spirit in ways that have been used for healing and empowerment for thousands of years. Visualization, together with meditation, offers an opportunity to connect with ourselves at a deeper level – a chance that the modern world rarely allows.

A Winter Solstice visualization

This visualization draws upon what we know about how the Winter Solstice was once marked at Newgrange in Ireland by those in the Neolithic era.

It is night and the air is cold. You look down at your bare feet upon the grass. A wintry but gentle breeze brushes against your cheek, stirring your hair. Around you there are others, walking slowly; some are speaking in low voices, others chanting and singing so quietly you can barely hear them. Some are silent. There are men and women of every age; some are walking with sticks or tall staffs. Younger children weave through everyone's legs or walk upright, eyes wide looking all around them. Some bear flaming torches; others carry small jars or bundles in their arms, holding them close with great care and tenderness.

Looking ahead, you see you are climbing a hill and in the darkness a vast but low mound is visible on its summit. Around its sides there is the pale glimmer of white stones shimmering in the darkness. Your heart beats harder and your steps grow faster as you make the steady climb. As you draw near to the mound, a buzz of excitement, a wave of emotion comes over you and you feel the great sanctity of this place. There is a tingle of power in the air that speaks to something ancient and a longing within you.

As you approach the mound, the great guardian stones – tall megaliths – loom out from the darkness. Those who have torches extinguish them in a huge stone cauldron and the crowd gathers, silently waiting. Even the children grow still and quiet. Those who hold bundles and jars come together, their heads bowed, each touching their brow to the stones, while others kneel or crouch to touch their lips to the cold earth. You step forward, joining those who will go within. There is a small cloth-wrapped bundle in your arms, too; you have not noticed it before but now you realize you have been carrying this for a long time, over many miles, many years.

Ahead of you, the entrance to the mound is dark and a vast guardian stone blocks the way. Each of your companions approaches this stone with great respect. Reaching out to touch it, you see in the glimmer of starlight that there are many spirals upon it. Tracing them with your finger, tears come to your eyes – not tears of sorrow but of soul, of deep remembering, as you contemplate the spirals of one life after another, your own and your ancestors flowing one into another, endless and complete. As your fingers trace a spiral, further and deeper into its centre, you feel a shift deep within

and find yourself gliding into the mound, into the utter darkness. The guardians have accepted you and you may enter the most sacred of places, the womb of the earth. Here you must stoop and crawl upward. It is warmer here, your chest and stomach and sides brush against stone and soil, as if you are climbing into a great woman's body, her stone and earthen spine stretched and arched over the hill beneath you.

Suddenly the way opens up, and you may stand or crouch once more. You sense the presence of the others. You feel their breath mingling with the scents of moist earth, of stone, of darkness. You feel your heart beating in your chest, pounding in your ears, and sense the others' hearts beating as one with your own, perhaps to the pulse of the great mound herself. The pulse becomes a low drumming, a chanting at the edge of hearing, and your body sways, tight in the darkness, against stone, against the other warm living souls. Gradually the beat grows stronger and one voice takes the lead, a single beat made by someone further in, singing and striking a staff upon the stony earth. For a while, their rhythm becomes all you know, part of your very being, and you see lights, bright in the darkness, spirals and stars swirling as if the heavens were here, and you were a part of them.

Suddenly, the chanting and the striking of wood on stone ceases. The silence is so strong and complete it is almost a physical force. You become aware that you dare not breathe, you will yourself not to breathe, and you hold the bundle in your arms tighter against your chest. Now the time is here, you resist, tears spring into your eyes, and you long to keep this bundle tight against you for ever. But ahead you see a gentle light, a tiny golden thread – not the silver blue of stars but a warm golden light, the tiniest sliver of the new sun, breaching the smothering dark. It grows and flows inward, the tide of a rushing sea of life. Beyond this place is the sun, newly risen, newly returned and reborn.

And as the light grows, touching deeper within, all those around you let out a deep sigh. There is another presence here now, a balance to the dark goddess of the earth, of the hill that holds you so close. The light of the sun is full of life beyond the earth, beyond the spiralling stars, of the source from which all life begins and is renewed. There is movement around you as stiff arms hold out their bundles and jars are opened carefully, offering what lies within, that these first rays of new life may touch them. And as the

light grows and touches all those souls within its reach, wisps of starry light rise up from all around and join the golden river of the sun.

Your arms tremble and there are tears on your cheek, as you unwrap your own bundle, and the bones of all that has passed lie open at last to the new light and turn to shimmering dust. The life they carried has returned once more to the source, exultant. They flash and are gone, risen upon the dawn.

Each person in turn places all that remains – bones and ashes – within shallow stone cauldrons deep in the heart of the mound, and crawl, heads bowed but hearts light, out into the new day.

Take your time as you let yourself return to your body once more. Feel yourself back in the here and now, and wiggle your fingers and toes before moving about.

Remember to ground yourself well afterwards by eating and drinking and perhaps recording your experiences in a journal.

A warming Winter Solstice ceremony

The Winter Solstice has always been a traditional time for ceremony and celebration. Gathering at this time helps us to nurture our relationships over the winter. Honouring the darkest night and the return of the light within our own lives as well as in the world around us is empowering and supportive, helping us envision new ways of being and giving space to our inner selves in the coming year.

Celebrating with friends, family and/or the wider community

Find a place where everyone can gather, perhaps with a solstice fire, and celebrate with songs and stories. Ask everyone to bring an instrument to play, a poem or a tale to share. Contributions can be spontaneous and recited by heart, or read aloud; it makes no difference. Try to include everyone, especially children and elders.

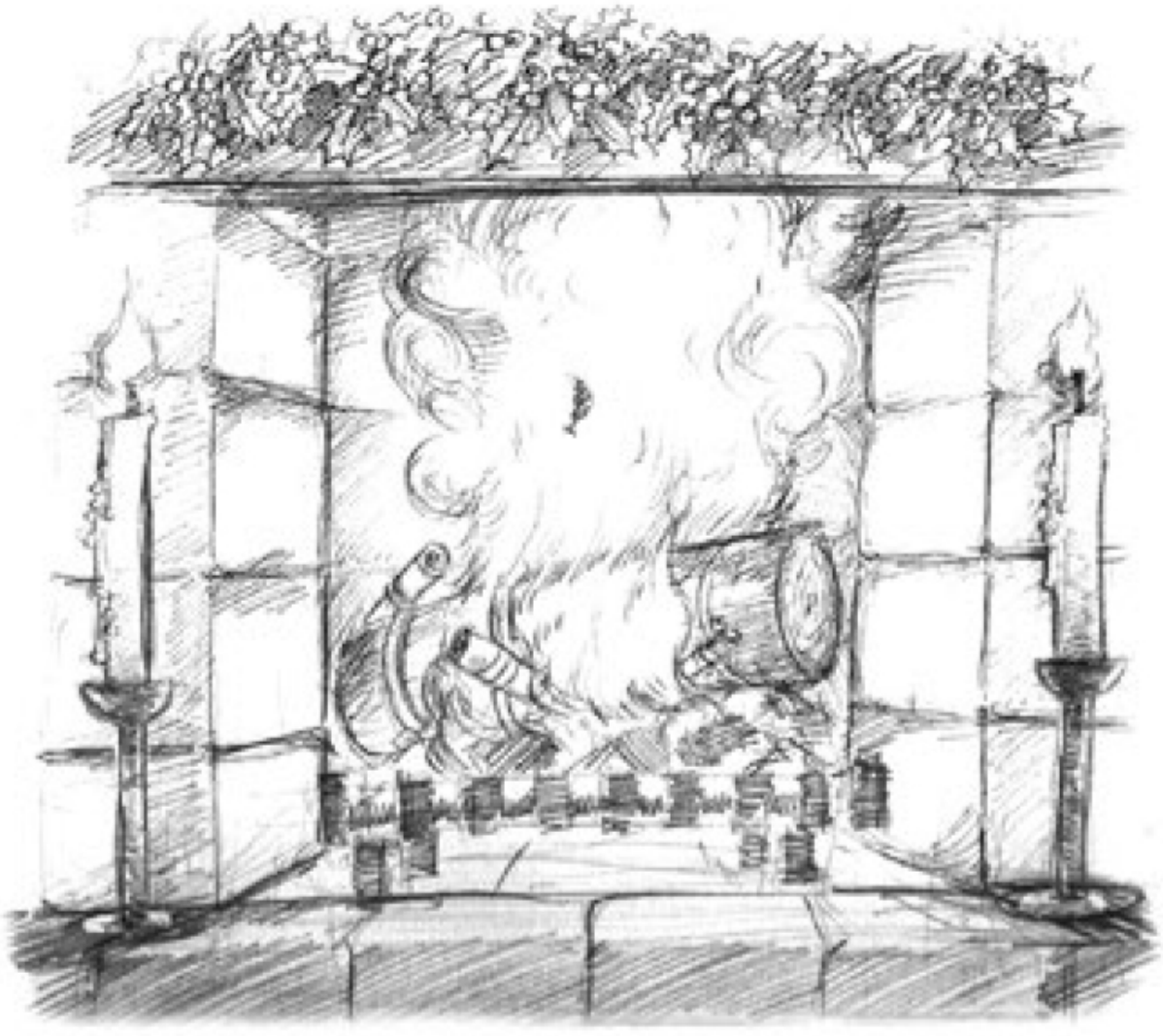
Prepare and share a feast, with hot drinks or soup if you're outside. Encourage everyone to dress up, as snow sprites and faeries, Jack Frost, the Holly King or the Cailleach. If you can, do vigil together through the

longest night, awaiting the dawn in silence after a prolonged celebration. You might also like to include a winter solstice chant, such as the Gaelic winter blessing (see page 282), ending with a great rousing cheer, ‘The sun has returned!’

When your ceremony is complete, finish with a feast. Now is a good time to share some mulled wine, spiced cider (see pages 279 and 278) and other festive foods, bringing in the solstice cheer.

Celebrating alone

Before the Winter Solstice, gather wood for a solstice fire and prepare any materials for your spells and crafts, such as your holly wreath or mulled wine charm sachets (see pages 274 and 279).



Solstice fire with Yule log and candles

To add atmosphere you might want to decorate your space just before the ceremony with holly, ivy, mistletoe and other evergreen boughs, as well as orange pomanders (see page 275) and candles.

Begin your ceremony by calling in the four directions and creating a sacred space (see page 14) before calling to any gods you feel drawn to: the Holly King, the Great Mother Bear and the sun god are obvious seasonal choices at this time. Alternatively, you may like to call upon your ancestors to bless and support your life and path or to help with anything that concerns you. Use your own heartfelt words to call upon them, as this is always more authentic and powerful, but you might say,

'Lord of the sun, king of the holly, please join us and bless us at this sacred time.'

Now would be a good time to perform the stellar or Winter Solstice visualization (see pages 269 and 282) or the mistletoe spell (see page 272).

You may now want to light a solstice fire, a Yule log or a candle (see pages 280–81). When it is lit, take a moment to gaze into the flames in silence. In your mind's eye, consider the returning sun, making the days longer and brighter from here until midsummer. Consider your life, and the ways in which you have grown tired and now seek renewal. The coming weeks are a time for rest and contemplation, for nurturing the seed of new life in darkness a while longer until it grows strong and emerges in spring.

Whether you are celebrating with friends and family or alone, finally, take a moment to give thanks and gratitude to each direction and element, as well as to any gods or ancestors for their help in your ceremony and their presence in your life. Give thanks for all the blessings of every kind that have come to you over the last year. This makes us conscious of the bond we have with all creation, and the interconnectedness of all things, which helps us grow into greater harmony with life.

Celebrating Winter Solstice

In celebrating the Winter Solstice we nourish our spiritual lives and create new ways of encountering the world around us, as well as enhancing the sense of renewal that this season offers in preparation for the first green shoots of the coming new year.

Blessed be!

The Magical Year
Danu Forest

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